やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

10.5
ten and a half

GAGAGA

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Chapter 1

Some day, even **Zaimokuza Yoshiteru** will stumble across an easy job that he can do, probably.

As anyone on this planet would know, Chiba rarely saw snow during the winter. Obviously, that didn't mean it wasn't cold because it *was* cold; it's winter, after all. I could even claim that Chiba's frigidity far surpasses any other winter country.

Of course, I really had no idea since I had never spent the period between the end of January to February anywhere else besides Chiba.

The only visible comparison I could go by was the display on the thermometer and the weather report reporting on the below-freezing weather, but regardless, I wouldn't actually know how cold it'd really be until I experienced it for myself.

On the other hand, it's another truth that the number on the thermometer wasn't always representative of how cold it'd be in Chiba.

In the world, there existed something called a heat index.

You experienced something first-hand, perceived it, learned it, and for the first time, you'd actually feel it.

As a juxtaposed example, right now, I could feel a growing divergence between the number on the wall thermometer and my heat index.

The sole reason for this was due to a single male student in front of me.

Sweat was excreting from all over his body even though it's the peak of winter, his mouth was convulsing, and he was wiping off the sweat at his brow with the back of his hand covered with fingerless gloves.

"…Mu."

When he groaned with a heavy voice, that student—Zaimokuza Yoshiteru—hung his head. As he was doing that, he buried his head into the coat he was seemingly fond of and closely resembled an avant-garde monument. He looked like he could be mistakenly placed at the entrance of a tower apartment for a high-class street in the Musashi Kosugi area.

With just that single groan, Zaimokuza went quiet and the Service Club returned to a space of stillness.

Aside from Zaimokuza and me, there were other people present in the club, but every single one of them was absorbed in their own business: one was reading a book with a cup of tea in one hand, another was fiddling with her cellphone while

chomping down on tea cakes, and the last one was adjusting her bangs looking at a compact mirror.

"…Muuuuun." Zaimokuza moaned again and looked up at the ceiling. This time his voice was, unlike earlier, feeble. But even so, he received no response.

When not a single person—not even one—reacted, Zaimokuza incessantly moaned over and over again.

Eventually getting fed up with that, a brief sigh came from the diagonally opposite corner of the table where I was sitting.

When I glanced in its direction, the Service Club president, Yukinoshita Yukino, placed her cup onto a saucer and pressed against her temple.

Yukinoshita made a gander at Zaimokuza and then slid her eyes over to me. "…For the time being, shall we ask what his business is?"

"Ehh…? But the only one who can talk with chuuni is Hikki, though."

The one who reluctantly answered while chomping down on rice crackers was Yuigahama Yui. With her body collapsed forward on the table, she turned her head towards me.

Well, for Yukinoshita and Yuigahama to give the suddenly intruding Zaimokuza some kind of response despite how long it took them, it could be considered as a form of kindness.

But the problematic one was the one who had him completely ignored the entire time while gazing into a mirror, Isshiki Iroha. *Then again, why are you even here? I mean, it's not a big deal or anything. I won't ask or anything.*

Isshiki didn't give Zaimokuza so much of a look. After she checked her bangs, she took out hand cream from her pouch and began skin maintenance on her hand while humming. She spread the cream along her thin fingertips and a citric smell filled the air.

That reminds me, Zaimokuza and Isshiki don't really know each other, do they?

Though, acquaintances or not, it's likely Isshiki wouldn't give Zaimokuza any time of the day. Naturally, the opposite held true.

Which leaves… I thought, but Yuigahama who had been leaning forward on the table asked, "Hikki, why don't you ask him?"

Yukinoshita nodded as if it was a given. "…That's true. Hikigaya-kun is originally the one responsible for these kinds of matters, after all."

"Don't put me in charge just because you feel like it…"

The only one I was responsible for was Totsuka-tan, you know? I was such a crazy fan that I'd create some fans of him and cheer for him at a live concert, you know? But the cuteness of saying Totsuka-tan was abnormal.

In any case, the sole individual in this room who could establish communication with Zaimokuza was me. I was vaguely aware of how troublesome it was going to be, but he didn't look like he'd leave the club unless I spoke to him.

"Zaimokuza, what did you come here for…?" I braced myself and asked.

He then shot up his face, showing a somewhat happy smile. "Ohh, Hachiman! What a coincidence this is!"

"No, you really don't need to act like that…"

"Hapon, as you say. I am currently in a bit of a bind as you can see…" Zaimokuza stopped for a moment. He corrected his posture as if to begin anew. As the one listening, I ended up doing the same.

"Do you recall our exchange about my worries of becoming a publishing editor?"

"Yeah. Of course, this also happens to be the first time I've heard about this."

Here he goes, blurting out something completely outrageous again… I thought.

Yuigahama who had been listening nearby murmured, "Wasn't it something about light novels or something before…?"

Man, Yuigahama sure was nice to actually respond. Compared to the other two, they were more or less giving him the cold shoulder. Even Yukinoshita who had shown some interest earlier saw no value in listening to Zaimokuza's answer just now and flipped the page of her book, going back to reading with a nonchalant look. As for Isshiki who didn't have any interest in him from the beginning, she had a complicated face as she was adjusting her eyelashes with a curler.

However, what Yuigahama pointed out was certainly right. Zaimokuza's dream should've been to become a light novel author. There, too, was a period when he claimed he wanted to become a game writer. But he immediately jumped ship and went back to wanting to become a light novel author again. His wishy-washy nature made me think he's far more suited to being a politician.

In any case, I looked at Zaimokuza to see why he had the sudden change in heart and he crossed his arm with a difficult face.

"Hmhm, it is because light novel authors are the dregs of the entertainment world. It is a job that does not require a foundation to start, a job that anyone can do. Quite frankly, no one would be envious of me even if I became a light novel author and light novels are treated as trash just for being light novels…"

Zaimokuza looked dejected as he spoke, but when he popped up his eyes, he stated with a solemn voice. "…And that is where I realized something."

"A-And that is…?" Despite sensing something ominous in the glint of his eyes past his glasses, I had to ask. Upon doing so, Zaimokuza violently jumped to his feet, knocking his chair back in the process.

“To write is to be criticized! To rest is to disappear! In the world of business, you are but a roadside rock! Is there value in such a job!?”

His powerful voiced clamored throughout the room as well as in my head.When the echoing stopped, Zaimokuza quietly took his seat again and the room went back to being quiet.

Despite his powerful voice, the room continued to act unconcerned. Even Yuigahama who had been listening to Zaimokuza moments ago had went back to fiddling with her phone.

The only one who could lend an ear to Zaimokuza’s tale at this moment was me. I might’ve been used to being alone, but even this solitude was a little excruciating.

“R-Right… You sure know your stuff…” I was at a loss at how to comment on his sudden outburst of lamentation and responded with something appropriate.

Zaimokuza grinned. “It is because I saw it on the internet.”

Wow. The internet is so amazing. The internet has, like, eeeverything.

Our exchange thus far had stimulated my satiety center so much that I was feeling bloated, but Zaimokuza continued on with his wonderful opinion. “As I mentioned earlier, publishing editors are much cooler! Not only are they able to have a stable life, they are one with the industry of creativity. It is more or less encroaching on the domain of anime creation! With this, I will be able to marry a voice actor! Fuahaha!”

“You must be drunk on Happy Meals with all those happy thoughts you have in your head…”

That would never happen even if Christmas, New Years, and your birthday happened on the same day. Heck, throw in Halloween and Valentine’s Day while you’re at it. On another note, “Happy Halloween” and “Happy Valentine’s Day” were used normally all over the world, but what’s so happy about them? Valentine’s Day was Saint Valentine’s death anniversary, you know… Are people going to start saying “Happy April Fools!” for April Fools, too?

In the same vein as the recent trend of appending happy to anything, Zaimokuza thoughts were no exception to the rule. They were so happy that they were bad. What’s bad? They were seriously bad.

In the first place, his final destination of marrying a voice actor was bad.

This era’s already suffering from low marriage rates as it is, so how could someone like a light novel author ever get married with a voice actor? Get your head out of the gutter already!

I don’t really care if Zaimokuza was hurt or depressed as he continued to pointlessly live his misunderstood life, but I had to make sure to inform him. It’s what they call the goodwill of a classmate.

“Zaimokuza.”

“Wh-What is it…?”

Either my voice had deepened without me noticing or my passion had leaked out with it, but when I called Zaimokuza’s name, he sat up straight and looked at me head-on. As I looked into his eyes, I slowly spoke.

“Let me ask you. When you were in middle school, did you think that once you got into high school, you’d be able to get a girlfriend?”

“Nugh!”

Bullseyes; Zaimokuza broke into a cold sweat and went dead quiet. I pressed further. “And this is what you should be thinking right now. And that is… ‘once I get into university, I should be able to get a girlfriend!’”

“Nnnngh! H-How did you know…!?”

He didn’t even need to ask. My answer was obvious.

“Everyone’s gone through that before, after all…” I said, instinctively letting out a heavy voice. Yes, there, too, was a time where I had those thoughts. It’s because I was a teeny, tiny toddler who knew nothing of the world nor his own place in it. You just couldn’t help but think about how you’d get married at twenty-five and have children. But as you progressed through middle and high school, you were gradually exposed to the inner mechanisms and reality of the world. This made you lower the standards of your idealistic visions. You couldn’t see your small dreams to realization; that’s this world, I dare say…[1]

When I had those thoughts, I suddenly ended up letting out a nihilistic chuckle. Zaimokuza sighed heavily and stiffly as if in agreement.

But there, I could hear a small cough overlap with a quiet voice.

“Everyone… I see.”

“Mmm…”

I turned and Yukinoshita who should’ve been reading her book glanced at me. But when our eyes met, she abruptly turned her face away. On the other hand, Yuigahama who had been fiddling with her cellphone had stopped her fingers and froze with a troubled expression.

And again, the club room became quiet. *Huh? What’s with this silence…?*

As I sat there restlessly in the awkward mood, Isshiki removed her gaze from her compact mirror and glanced at us. She then let out a brief sigh. “…I don’t really care, but is it easy to enter a publisher?”

I was under the impression she hadn’t been listening since she had been ignoring Zaimokuza the entire time, but apparently, the conversation had reached her ears.

When Isshiki asked, the stiff atmosphere finally dissolved. She probably wasn't asking anyone in particular, but Yukinoshita tilted her head in contemplation. "I've heard that there's a high barrier to entry for publishers…"

"Ohh, it does sound pretty hard, huh?"

It was doubtful that Yuigahama had any idea what the problem was. I wonder if this girl actually knew what publishers did as a company in the first place…

In any case, ignoring Yuigahama for the moment, Yukinoshita was right on. I recall hearing from my pops that it's considerably difficult finding employment at major mass media outlets. *Now then, let's see just how intent Zaimokuza is in challenging those places…* I looked at Zaimokuza and he was unexpectedly calm.

"Indeed. I, too, have scoured the internet and it seems joining one is quite a task." Zaimokuza groaned as he crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. "However, I cannot comprehend it…

What makes it so difficult…? Light novel editors can work even in their sleep. It is a simple job that anyone can do. All you have to do is read completed manuscripts or send a mail to the people at the top rankings of 'Let's Be A Novelist'[2] and ask them to publish their works, yes?"

"S-Sure…"

I wouldn't have suspected the he was once someone who had aimed to become a light novel author from those thoughtless words of his, but well, it's true that the work of light novel editors wasn't common knowledge, so this bias was unavoidable.

Normally speaking, a light novel editor was an exhausting job. Think about it, if they had to work together with people who thought pathetically like Zaimokuza, consider the gastritis, heartburn, and Yamanouchi[3] they had to deal with… The worse the light novel author, the more they blamed the editors, too…

"Well, you won't know until you get a job at one," I said.

Zaimokuza then wagged his finger while clicking his tongue. *This guy sure is annoying…*

"Of course, I have already concocted plans regarding the job hunt."

"You don't say… Let's hear them."

"There is no doubt that seeking employment as a new graduate will be difficult. But it is another story if you are to transfer occupations. With someone of my caliber, I simply need to slip my way into an editorial company or a low-key publisher and aim to be recruited as one with experience," said Zaimokuza, chuckling with an incredibly, triumphant look. It's a mystery why he seemed so convincing with that confident smug of his.

"Ohh, he's surprisingly thinking things through…"

As it turned out, Yuigahama was easily deceived.

“No, your first problem is how you’re going to get into those editorial companies and publishers…”

His proposal was the very image of a written career plan. Except, the only issue was how super deformed and unrealistic it was. As if spotting those loopholes, Yukinoshita squinted and made a complicated face. “In the first place, if we’re considering smaller to medium-sized companies, they shouldn’t be actively recruiting…”

But not listening to things that were inconvenient to him were the EARS of Zaimokuza.

“And there, I thought. If I can amass editorial experience as a pupil, I can easily find employment at GaGaGa Bunko…”

“You’re underestimating GaGaGa too much…”

So you say, but we’re talking about one of the three biggest companies in the country, Shogakukan, you know… He was looking down on the world so much that it was refreshing, but let’s just put that aside.

The issue was what followed.

“As such, in order to accumulate that experience, I was thinking of creating a doujinshi.”

“Uh huh. Yeah, well, do your best.”

“Umu… But currently, I have no ‘true comrade’[4] that I can create a doujinshi with… A ‘true comrade’ that can see and hear the same things as I do…”

“R-Right…”

What is with that cringeworthy phrase you’re using…? Now I’m getting bad vibes from him… As I trembled from my bad premonition, as if to stop that shaking of mine, Zaimokuza placed his hands on my shoulders.

Then, he showed me a smile that was bright enough to illuminate the world.

“So… Hachiman, let us make one together!”

“I refuse. Also, I’m not your comrade.”

Your easygoing enthusiasm as if you were saying, “Isono, let’s play some baseball”[5]wasn’t enough to illuminate my world. I’d like to request for indefinite retirement here. Though, I’d be perfectly fine with helping if I was compensated.

“Hachimaaaaaaaaaaan! Were we not always comrades!? Why must you always be so cruel!?” Zaimokuza indignantly called me cruel over and over again. *You really think I can go along with your nonsense all the time?* As I ignored Zaimokuza’s grumbling, there was the folding sound of a compact mirror.

When I looked towards the sound, Isshiki who had either finished polishing herself up or checking over her appearance put away her mirror in her pouch.

Then, she propped up her chin with her index finger and tilted her head in contemplation. “Ummm, what’s a ‘doujinshi’?”

“Well, to put it simply, it’s a self-made book. You write your own manga or something like that and make it into a book.”

“…Right.”

Isshiki was still seeing question marks even after my explanation. I wasn’t a professional on the subject myself, so I wasn’t sure how to explain it to her.

As I struggled over the explanation, sitting diagonally from me, Yuigahama shot up her hands going “me, me!”

“I know what it is! It’s called Comiket or something, right? The thing where you draw your own manga. I think Hina talked about it before.”

“That’s a rather sloppy explanation. Also, Ebina-san’s hobbies are a bit special, but well, you’re on the right track,” I said.

This time, Yukinoshita had an unconvinced and doubtful look. “It doesn’t apply only to manga. When I hear the term, I have a stronger association with the field of literature and the arts.”

“Right, there’s that, too.”

Actually, if we’re going to trace the term back to its roots, even famous and great writers had produced their own books before. Literature like *Shirakaba*[6] and *Garakuta Bunko* were even in school textbooks.

In reality, doujinshis were expansive in scope and weren’t confined to just manga, but review books, investigative study books, or even photo albums. There were distinct genres as well as an extreme variety of content out there.

Also, when I mentioned review books, that ranged from critique books on military affairs to a review synopsis of a previous cour anime. There were even books of rock-paper-scissor victories between Sunday anime[7], too. Furthermore, large-scale doujin activities went beyond just books and extended to cosplay, self-produced anime, drama CDs, and character goods. So, the scope was huge.

“Right, so Comiket… Now that you mention it, I’ve heard about it before.”

So you know about it, Raiden?[8] Well, Comiket’s been the focus on television and special programs recently, so it wouldn’t be strange to know about its existence.

However, Isshiki seemed to have a one-sided understanding of it.

“Isn’t it, like, a place where you can make loooads of money?” She asked, leaning slightly forward in keen interest with sparkling eyes. Her movements were like that of a pure maiden, but what came out of her mouth was completely terrible…

“No, that’s not necessarily true. I hear they usually disregard their profits.”

Doujinshi were first and foremost, “I make them because I like to”, so their objective was supposedly not for profit. That’s not to say I knew since I wasn’t clear on the details myself. But among the numerous circles who created doujinshi, if you factored in their sundry expenses, they typically hovered between the red and green, plus and minus, or zero.

“…They don’t profit… but still do it?” Upon finishing, Isshiki groaned and began holding her head. It seems she was having trouble understanding…

“So it’s something like a world of hobbies.” Yukinoshita nodded. Well, for Yukinoshita who I could imagine spending money on her hobbies like tea, Pan-san the Panda, and cat merchandise, it might actually be up her alley.

“That kind of stuff is pretty amazing though, huh?” said Yuigahama, chewing her candy. Given that it’s her, she seemed somewhat impressed even though she didn’t sound like it. She let out a sigh.

“Doujin activities aren’t anything rare. Actually, otaku aren’t the only ones who want to make books, you know.”

“You think soooo?” Isshiki still had a skeptical voice. When we’re dealing with cultural things such as doujinshi that were foreign in nature to someone like Isshiki, her impressions were normal.

But there were other examples similar in concept.

“There are things like free newspapers that university students make. Think of that,” I said.

Yuigahama tapped her hands. “Oh, so something like those things they put up during school festivals.”

“…Ohh, that I can understand.” Isshiki nodded as if she was able to form an image of it.

“Right? Basically, free newspapers are overly-aware[9] types of doujinshi.”

“Hearing you put it like that makes it sound incredibly questionable, but that’s a perfect way to put it…” As if remembering something unpleasant, Yukinoshita pressed firmly against her temple.

What a coincidence, when I mentioned “overly-aware”, my head kind of went blank there, too.

“In any case, there might be some BIAS when it comes to FREE NEWSPAPERS, but I think we managed to come to a mutual CONCENSUS. Of course, when we’re talking about FREE NEWSPAPERS, it’s on a CASE BY CASE BASIS, so in order for us to reach a clear AGREEMENT, the only thing we can do hereafter is to look at them each with TRIAL AND ERROR as an INFLUENCER, that way, we can COMMIT on something with the result.”

“Senpai, what the heck are you saying…?” Isshiki winced. It kind of looked like she had backed a few centimeters away from the back of my chair.

“Oh, sorry. My awareness went overboard for an instant there…”

“It may have been better if it had just gone somewhere else instead…” Yukinoshita sighed in astoundment.

Either way, we were now all on the same page that doujinshis were hobbyist things.

People who created free newspapers were more or less no different from doujin circles. In other words, they were an otaku genre for “overly-aware types”.

If I had to say, doujinshis existed on just the numbers of genres and on the numbers of people.

“So, what kind of book are you looking to make?” I asked Zaimokuza.

He thought silently for a moment. Then, he lifted his face with a crisp face and opened his mouth.

“Fumu. I suppose it’ll have to be a novel… I am not knowledgeable about anything in particular nor do I possess the ability to draw.”

His reasons were way too pathetic.

Isn’t it about time you stop with that hackneyed “since I can’t draw, I’ll become a light novel author!” trend…? At the very least, I want you to aim to become a light novel author with a proper reason like, “I don’t think I’ll be able to find employment, so I’ll become a light novel author instead!”

“In the end, it’s going to be a light novel… If you really want to write one, there’s plenty of ways to get them published on the internet. Like what you mentioned earlier, ‘Let’s Be a Novelist!’ or whatever. Actually, I think you’d have higher chances of debuting if you tried there.”

As rare as it was for me, I gave Zaimokuza some constructive advice, but he didn’t seem very keen about it. “Mmm… I cannot say I like that place very much.”

“Why not? Try it, it’s pretty darn popular right now, right? Parallel Universe Reincarnation Peerless CheaRem.”

“…Huh?”

The instant I uttered that, Isshiki let out a low voice as if she was saying, “What the heck is this guy saying…?”

What’s with that look? How irritating... Did I say something weird just now? I thought, and it turned out I did.

The girls huddled their chairs together in a group and began whispering in deliberation.

“Parallel, Universe? Chea? What did he say just now…?”

“CheRem… what’s that?”

“Maybe he means cheetaras?”

Refined snacks you're into there, Isshiki.

Parallel Universe Reincarnation Peerless CheaRem recites the tale of the protagonist being reincarnated in a parallel world while building a harem through his peerless, cheating powers. *Crap, trying to explain it made no sense to me at all.*

Well, it's something that should just be enjoyed by those who liked it. There's no need to forcefully explain it to people who weren't interested nor was it something that everyone needed to understand.

Parallel Universe Reincarnation Cheating stories were originally similar to light novels, so it's fine as as long the people who liked them were happy with them.

And this didn't apply to just light novels.

It applied to everything. Words, or even feelings.

As long those things were able to reach the one person you wanted to convey them to or make happy, that's more than enough.

But I wonder why? It just wasn't getting through to Zaimokuza-san at all.

Even now, he was ignoring what we were saying and was wriggling his arms and legs as if desperately holding something in.

"Arghhhh! That is not the issue! It is not about popularity or how well-received it is! I do not care about that at all, it does not bother me at all! It's just, um, you know? How should I put it!? I do not like the idea of being confined to things like rankings and standings! Like, I do not want people criticizing my work behind a screen or something!"

I was almost deluded into thinking he had uttered something cool for an instant there, but there were all sorts of curious words coming out of his mouth. And one answer came to mind.

"Ahh. Huh? Do they display the rankings there? Well, I guess it might be a little too rough seeing how unpopular your work is, huh?"

"No! Absolutely not! Rankings, standings, ratings, and reviews do not bother me in the slightest! Things like rankings are nothing more than a metric! The rest need only be covered with courage!" said Zaimokuza, eagerly.

However, in the end, there were just some things you couldn't cover with courage alone. With how transparent he was being about the thing he was concerned about, he was completely see-through!

"…Oh. So, your spirit broke from actually submitting something, huh?"

"That's some growth on his part considering the amount of resolve you'd need to show something like *that* to the public."

"Yep, yep, he's got the guts."

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked both surprised and impressed as they complimented Zaimokuza. But just to make sure, you guys *were* complimenting him, right? Right? Because I was completely under the impression you guys were being incredibly sarcastic there! Then again, this was Yukinoshita we're talking about here, of course she's being sarcastic!

I, however, was in the mood to praise Zaimokuza.

We're talking about a man who could never even finish a manuscript, much less submit an entry to the Rookie of the Year award. While it might've been just on the internet, he still had uploaded his work to a public domain. When I think about how there's going to be other people who'd suffer from reading his work besides me, I felt ecstatic. Everyone should just suffer more. If everyone suffered together, the world would definitely turn peaceful.

Or so I thought, but Zaimokuza shook his hand back and forth in a rejecting notion. "No, I did nothing of the sort. It is my impression after seeing another person's work get damned to hell."

"Oh, okay…"

Looks we're still a long way from world peace.

That's Zaimokuza for you. His title of a pathetic wannabe wasn't for show. No wait, let's think about it this way; for him to be this empathetic from seeing someone else's work get bashed to pieces was a testament to his considerable sensitivity. Surprisingly, he might have the aptitude to become a writer…

However, I personally believe that the most important aspect of being a light novel writer wasn't the ability to write or to compose, and certainly not even a rich imagination; it's to not be sensitive.

What's important was to have a mentality of steel.

You wouldn't lose regardless of what was said to you; you wouldn't give in even if you didn't sell; you wouldn't say anything unnecessary on your blog or Twitter; you wouldn't get carried away even if you managed to get some sales; you wouldn't get disheartened when people mocked you; you wouldn't get involved in disputes of one thing or another when they happen; you wouldn't look directly at a situation that got out of hand; you wouldn't exaggerate your own ability; you wouldn't believe in yourself from the start; you wouldn't worry about your future and your age catching up on you; you wouldn't cry on a lonely night; you wouldn't raise your expectations when receiving wonderful news; you wouldn't let numbers from other places bother you; you wouldn't resign if you stopped being able to write; you wouldn't run away from deadlines; and you wouldn't forget to appreciate your surroundings.

These NAI-NAI 16[10] things were necessary components in your mentality to become a light novel author.

The strength of your mentality—that's the most important. I think the light novel *As Long I Had a Little Sister* had that written in it. No, maybe it didn't. Yeah, it probably didn't.

But since Zaimokuza was neither professional nor gutsy, I had to lead him down a path that was hassle-free! His mentality was completely like plain tofu that I'd recommend having hot pot this season.

I straightened my posture and cleared my throat. With a voice calmer than normal, I said, "Zaimokuza. It's likely your doujinshi won't sell a single copy. Don't you think it'd be less painful if you looked at reality?"

Zaimokuza stammered, imagining the likelihood of that occurring. Whether it's enduring the heat of the summer convention or the cold of the winter convention, the feeling of being by yourself at your booth, listening in on the amiable voices of the cosplay girls at the nearby booths, watching a huge line form at the circle in front of you, and looking up at the ceiling because you couldn't stand facing your own doujinshis that didn't sell a single copy… Could Zaimokuza handle such a situation? No. I say absolutely not.

Eventually, Zaimokuza's shoulders dropped and as if mustering out his voice, he said, "…You have a point."

"If you're aiming to become an editor, it'd be more constructive to think of other methods instead of making a doujinshi."

"Fumu… I see, I see…" Zaimokuza answered honestly as if his spirit was broken from my pressing words. *Good, good, now I won't have to worry about making a doujinshi with Zaimokuza…*

Once Zaimokuza who had a loud voice earlier turned docile, the room was submerged in silence. I let out a sigh of relief now that we had finished this issue. Then, there was the sound of crackers being chomped.

"But hey, how do you even become an editor?" said Yuigahama, chewing.

Zaimokuza lifted his face. "Indeed, that is true…"

Now that they brought it up, I was interested as well.

"I guess we should look it up…"

As Zaimokuza had so elegantly stated earlier, everything was on the internet. That included things that shouldn't be on there.

"Yukinoshita, let me use the computer."

"…We aren't a computer room." Yukinoshita mumbled as she stood up. She took out the laptop and promptly prepared it for me.

I faced the laptop looking to ask Google-sensei some questions and a chair was placed down next to me.

When I looked to my right, Yukinoshita was sitting in the chair and digging through her bag to take out her glasses.

After gently lifting up her glossy, black hair, she carefully wore her glasses as if she was putting on a tiara.

Her slender and supple fingertips slowly moved away from the frame of her glasses. Whenever she blinked, her long eyelashes looked like they were close enough to brush the lenses. Once she had finished preparing, without facing anyone in particular, she nodded and quietly scooted the chair in to look at the laptop.

In doing so, her hair would flutter with the sweet fragrance of SABON[11].

Close…

With her sitting right next to me, I had this strange, itchy discomfort that caused me to wrestle my body to the left so I could get comfortable. But when I did that, my nose was greeted with a faint whiff of lingering citrus.

Before I had even realized, Yuigahama made her way around to my left and was sitting.

She leaned her body forward as if to rest her chin on the table. Every time our elbows lightly bumped each other, we'd exchange glances telling the other to make some space.

But just when I thought she'd open up some room, Yuigahama would avert her eyes and our positions would stay the same. In that case, I had to do the moving, but when I felt the hems of my blazer rubbing past her skirt, I was unable to move any farther.

…Close.

Furthermore, there was another presence behind me.

Indoor sandals squeaked against the floor.

When I turned my head around, Isshiki was standing behind me. She peeked her head past the tip of my shoulder to look at the screen of the computer.

The sensation of her hands which she placed on my shoulders as if to lightly entrust her weight on mine and her body warmth made me strangely conscious and even her shallow breathing had reached my ears. Thanks to that, chills ran up my spine.

…Like I said, you're too damn close.

With my flanks and my rear occupied, my only option was to pitch forward.

But even my front was sealed off.

Zaimokuza came directly to my front and looked down on the laptop as if he was some kind of giant, bald yokai.

You're too close, get away from me.

Pressured in almost all directions, I huddled my shoulders together while typing in the keywords that came to mind. Numerous search results immediately displayed onscreen.

"A job hunting site with a job hunting bulletin board… Ohh, a prep school for job searching in publication… They have all sorts of stuff, huh?"

"Oh Hikki, how about this one?"

As I scanned several notable links, Yuigahama leaned forward with her body and pointed at the screen. Then, Yukinoshita also inclined her head this way and read the entry that Yuigahama had indicated.

"A journal of successful experiences… It looks like… the blog of someone who received unofficial offers from actual publishers. I suppose that should be fine."

"Senpai, hurry, hurry." Isshiki rushed me as she tapped my shoulders.

Again, you're too close. I'm getting all sweaty now too, so could you, like, back up fifteen centimeters away from me or something…?

I gave Zaimokuza a look of what to do and he nodded. "Umu, let us have a look!"

"…Alright, let's check this one then."

I clicked the aforementioned link and the top page of the journal of successful experiences loaded on the screen.

The header had **"Absolute Best Unofficial Offers! kenken's Journal of "Successful" Job Hunting Experiences at Publishers!!"** displayed as the title.

"…Hey, what does it mean by 'best unofficial offers'? Are there best and worst unofficial offers or something?"

"Hold on."

When I asked, Yukinoshita extended out her hand to the mouse from my side. She opened up a different tab and began searching for best unofficial offers and so forth. While she was doing that, her long black hair would brush and tickle the back of my hand. Naturally, I withdrew my hands to my knees and sat in a well-mannered pose.

Once her search displayed the results, she pointed. "It seems like it refers to an unpublicized ranking of prospective employees within the company. The best offers seem to be referring to the ones at the top of those rankings. Upon entry into the company, they'll be treated as executive trainees and they'll also have the advantage in where they are assigned… or so it says."

"You know, just hearing 'executive trainees' gets me a little worried…"

That sounds like a sweatshop if I ever heard one. It sounded as worrisome as slogans like "The feeling of being at home!" or "The young generation are showing great efforts!" Now I was becoming concerned about what lie ahead in kenken's future.

Well then, having already witnessed something frightening, we might as well follow along this kenken or whatever's path of glory to see if he's able to wonderfully become a corporate slave of a publisher through his best unofficial offers.

We scrolled down the screen and decided to read the journal entries one by one.

"Absolute Best Unofficial Offers! kenken's Journal of "Successful" Job Hunting Experiences at Publishers!!"

This blog will discuss the process of getting the best unofficial offers from publishers one by one!

All rights reserved @kenken

1. Filling Out The Job Application

JA's a strange acronym, isn't it (lol)?

On the applications, there are standard questions that ask you to provide a short CV, your work history, and your motive for applying. Besides those, there are also questions unique to every company such as: write an essay or comedy skits on three topics, recent news that interested you, three people who are currently the center of attention, your most embarrassing story of failure, etc… Sometimes, they have eccentric parts as well such as having blank white pages asking you, "Please use this space to describe yourself."

Job offices also store past JA's as well, so one effective strategy is to ask upperclassmen from a seminar or a club to let you see theirs!

As an addendum, regarding the CV…

Recently, there have been many job applications that do not have a university name listed, so you will not always be put through an academic filter. As a matter of fact, I have championed the stance against the very existence of academic filters from the start. Many students who were extended unofficial offers from famous companies were from well-known universities, but I feel the reason for this is only because said students happened to attend a well-known school and was chosen based on their hidden potential and not the brand or strength of their alma mater.

Perhaps many companies will begin to recruit people by evaluating them on a much more equal and personal level without any bias.

Conversely, perhaps we, the job seekers, also should not judge a company based on their brand or their name value. It is possible that being aware of the

fact that the companies and job seekers share a mutual position in selecting each other may be the key to success.

I want to send this saying to everyone.

"When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." (Nietzsche)

Hoh… It's actually written quite decently based on a quick look. Actually, why was kenken sending the words of Nietzsche to us? I honestly would prefer Nietzsche himself doing that.

Yukinoshita who had been looking at the blog together with me nodded her head as she continued reading. But Yuigahama and Isshiki had a disgusted expression and looked slightly hesitant.

"It's so wordy…" Yuigahama murmured.

You won't be able to read Conan if this amount is enough to get you down. There might be a lot of words, but interesting things are still interesting!

While thinking that, my shoulder was tapped repeatedly in irritation.

"This is kinda annoying, isn't it…?" said Isshiki in dissatisfaction and continued tapping my shoulder with her fingertips. *Alright, let's stop tapping my shoulder now, okay?*

But well, Isshiki's feelings were understandable. Somehow, I was getting fed up with this person's writing.

It's a mystery as to why he was acting so high and mighty, but his content sounded like something you'd hear from an overly-aware university student. Just the thought of university having a lot of these people made me not want to go…

That being said, this kenken person or whatever was considerably pretty out there from the start. My motivation was just going to disappear If his entries after this one were going to be just as enthusiastic. KinKi Kids[12] or Yoshida Terumi[13] were the only ones I could think of that had this much energy.

"Fumu… I see, I see. I understand it now, more or less. Hachiman, proceed to the next!"

It's doubtful that Zaimokuza actually really understood anything, but I nodded back and clicked to the next page.

2. Written Exams

Many publishers test on general knowledge, but there are some who give out SPI tests. They sell workbooks for both types of tests, so it would be wise to prepare with them beforehand. For ordinary companies, SPI is required. In addition, you may have to take the SPI test if you are changing occupations. There is no harm in preparing for it as well. As for the written portion of the

exam, based on my personal experiences, Company S and Company K asked good extensive questions while Bookstore K asked bad questions that were focused on failing you. So for those who are trying Bookstore K, beware!

While he appeared calm, he slipped in some words of resentment towards Bookstore K… Judging by this, this kenken or whatever likely failed at Bookstore K.

"Hachiman, what is SPI? A spy?"

When Zaimokuza's voice came down from above, Yuigahama reacted. "Isn't that some kind of magazine? Since it's a publisher, I guess you have to read that, huh?"

"What you're talking about is the 'SPA!' magazine…"

A "SPA!" test? What the heck is that? Are they going to tell me to "answer with the top thirty gyoza stores @Shinbashi" or something? The frightening thing was that the publishers could easily ask you questions you'd get on Quiz Champions[14].

But I wasn't very knowledgeable on the subject of SPI exams myself, so when I was in a bind with answering, Yukinoshita quietly reached out to the laptop. She opened another tab and began searching for SPI tests.

When she finally stumbled upon a relevant page, she slowly moved her hand to her chin and nodded. "To put it simply, SPI is a type of aptitude test. It seems like… they measure a set of skills such as your logical reasoning, calculative thinking, and communication ability as well as your character through a personality assessment."

Yukinoshita consolidated the important points and explained while pushing up her glasses with her middle finger. But for Yuigahama, it didn't seem to make much sense since her mouth was agape.

"Ohhhh… so you're saying it's like a psychological test or something? I totally get that!" said Yuigahama brightly, and she turned towards Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita then looked away in the opposite direction as if she had given up on something. "…Well, I suppose that understanding is good enough."

"No, that's definitely wrong."

"Yukinoshita-senpai, please don't give up on explaining…" said Isshiki.

As if having second thoughts, Yukinoshita closed her eyes and started to think.

"I-I suppose. I'm sure even Yuigahama-san can understand if I give more thought to my explanation. In a way that Yuigahama-san can understand… In a way that Yuigahama-san can understand…" Yukinoshita muttered in whispers while earnestly contemplating.

Seeing that, Yuigahama's shoulders dropped. "Yukinon's kindness kinda hurts…"

Well, trying to explain or understand a test you had never taken before might be difficult. In this case, you had to take these tests for yourself to actually understand them. Whether we like it or not, we all had to take these tests someday eventually. *Ughh, I really don't want to look for a job…*

However, it's reassuring that you could prepare for these written exams beforehand.

If there's something difficult in the process, it'd be the "interviews" that were in the upcoming entries.

Now, just how was kenken going to get past this obstacle? I proceeded to the next entry to see what he had in store for us.

3. The First Interview

There are occasions where you'll be interviewed in a group.

There was this guy at Big K that kept butting in and trying to provoke me. He was seriously annoying. I'll resent that guy forever.

That was all that was written. *You're suddenly neglecting your explanations now, aren't you, kenken? But you're still making sure to put down your resentment though, aren't you, kenken?*

Zaimokuza made second looks at the meager content.

"Ooohn? Hachiman, is there nothing more written?"

"Looks like it. Let's look at the next one."

With so little written, there wasn't much information we could gain from it.

After checking with Yukinoshita and the others, I moved the mouse and clicked to the next page.

4. The Second Interview

When I gave my reason for applying, this guy from Company F was trying to piss me off by telling me, "Okay, good job on being able to say that! ^^". He was probably some kind of chief editor or something, though. I definitely won't forgive that guy.

The entry at this point just threw all explanations out the window and was littered with nothing but resentment

In following kenken's job hunting experiences that gradually worsened, a dry laugh started to well inside of me.

I could hear my neighbor Yukinoshita sigh. “There’s less and less detailed information every entry.”

“If anything, he’s getting more specific about things that don’t really matter…” Isshiki made a wry smile in wonder.

Just as these two said, kenken was providing less and less information and seemed to have been breaking down at the same time. Even I was on the verge of keeling over while reading this. *Looking for a job sure sounds hard…*

But this was just the second interview. There was still more left to his journal of successful experiences.

I made a large stretch, readied myself, and proceeded to the next entry.

5. The Third Interview

The stress interview. There were about 10 middle-aged men employees at Company K. It was bad. There might’ve been 20 of them. It was really bad.

Now kenken wasn’t even complaining anymore. His initial enthusiasm had disappeared in a puff of smoke and he was already at death’s door. If anything, I wanted to commend his mental strength for going out of his way to put up all this information.

But just the mention of a stress interview made you feel the considerable pressure associated with it. Even in this brief entry, the fear and despair of how bad it the interviews went were quite apparent.

We could only imagine it, but interviewing with the employees of a company sounds super hard. If you had a bunch of distinguished old men with many years under their belt wearing black suits with prominent titles like board member, company executive, management director, and executive director sitting side by side, isn’t that just SEELE[15]? This wasn’t just any Impact, it’s the Third Impact.

“It sounds kinda hard…” Yuigahama whispered, her voice mixed with sympathy and grief. I, too, was feeling similarly miserable.

“It looks like there’s still more…” said Yukinoshita, slightly in pain. It almost even sounded as if she was suggesting us to not look any further.

But we had come this far, so we should—no, we had to see it through to the end. I operated the mouse with my shaking hand and clicked to the final entry.

6. The Final Interview

Those mass-res bastards lied about how the last interview was just to confirm your intent to apply and not something you’d fail in. Don’t screw with me. They normally just failed me.

The journal of experiences stopped there.

Exactly what happened to kenken in the end? Just thinking about his fate caused my chest to tighten.

I was seemingly not the only one as everyone else had also let out a profound sigh.

It's like feeling guilty from peeking into the small blue print of a single person's life or feeling helpless after being witness to the frontlines in the war of job hunting.

But beyond that, I felt this strong desire of not wanting to work with the person who had made this journal. He was so full of enthusiasm at the beginning, but in the middle, he was mostly just cursing and complaining…

"Um… so, like, did this person even pass?" Isshiki asked in modest.

Yuigahama then realized and looked at the display again. "You're right! He even called it a 'successful experiences' journal, too!"

"Ahh, it's probably that. They basically just write 'successful' in advance. It's like a rule of attraction and it's something like image training that overly-aware people tend to like."

"It sounds more like something for self-enlightenment than it is for image training…" said Yukinoshita as she pressed against her temple.

Well, there certainly was a component about job hunting that pertained to self-enlightenment… I mean, when we were surfing the web earlier, there were these gaudy phrases like self-reflection, self-PR, the desire to grow, and other stuff. Sure, it might be unavoidable since companies were looking for human resources with a tenacious and strong mentality, but the way everyone was trying to exhibit a similarly, colorful personality was extremely unnatural that it's scary.

*Now that I know this much, it doesn't sound like an industry I'd be able to work in…*As my meter of work desire went rock bottom, Zaimokuza who was standing in front of me spoke to me with a small voice. "Hachiman, what is mass-res? Is that something like the Chiba-dog[16]?"

"They're nothing alike. Which Chiba dog are you talking about here?"

Chiba-dog was a character mascot of the Chiba Prefecture Environment Foundation and was a dog based on the geographical shape of Chiba Prefecture. Putting it that way, you might think it might be similar to CHI-BA+KUN, but they're surprisingly different creatures. Chiba-dog had dog in its name, yet it didn't resemble one at all. As a matter of fact, the mysteriously named creature that looked like a dog CHI-BA+KUN was much more dog-like. Just what's going on with Chiba's tastes? This prefecture's way too rocky.

Listening, Yukinoshita tilted her head in thought. “Well, it’s most likely short for mass media research society.”

“Research… It sounds like they’d totally do a lot of experiments.” Yuigahama murmured as she stared up at the ceiling. She was probably imagining all sorts of related things to research. But Gahama-san’s imagination of wearing a coat while holding flasks and beakers was probably mistaken, I think!

However, it’s true that the word “research” didn’t refer to anything in particular, so it’s rather hard to imagine it. It’s easy if it’s about scientific techniques or history, but for mass media research, not much came to mind.

“…I guess we should try looking up mass-res then.”

“Indeed. Do as you must!”

Since Zaimokuza gave me a reassuring agreement while flapping his coat like Professor Clark, I promptly asked Google-sensei for the answer.

I entered a random university name, added a space, and appended “mass-res”.

After submitting the phrase, there we had it, there we had it. On display were all these overly-aware phrases. They had a photo of people in suits introducing themselves decorated with their favorite motto along for self-promotion. After that, there were tons of comments of support from their friends.

In addition, there were photos of them taking a trip to India, mountain climbing at Mount Fuji, a BBQ training camp for job hunting, so I had no idea what it was that they were researching.

I closed my eyes halfway as I read because looking at the page directly was just too much for me. Eventually, I had a general understanding of what the club was about.

Basically, it was a club that gathered people who sought for employment at television broadcast stations, newspaper companies, or publishers. There, they’d exchange information and teach other foolproof methods to succeed in securing employment.

“H-Hey, Hachiman, must I enter one of these mass-res clubs in order to enter a publisher? Must I really? Absolutely?” Zaimokuza trembled in fear as he looked upon the photos of bliss.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s absolute. I actually think you’d be better off not joining something like this based on the homepage alone…”

I’m sure amongst the many clubs that promoted themselves as mass media or advertising research societies, there were some who actually did what they were supposed to do.

But just hearing overly-aware stuff like that made me think of Sir Tamanawa, the student council president of Kaihin Sogo High, so I just couldn’t hold a positive image at all.

As I looked at the website, a particular sentence grabbed my attention.

"…Actually, Zaimokuza, I don't think you'll be able to get in."

"Hm, why?"

I pointed at the corner of the screen. Displayed there was, "Entrance Exam." They had a written test that asked general knowledge questions and the names of several club members beside the club president that you needed to interview with.

"Apparently you'll need to take a written test and go through interviews to join this mass-res club or whatever."

I tapped on the relevant part of the screen with my finger and Isshiki looked down. With an apathetic voice, she said, "Ahh, I guess it's impossible then…"

"Hmhm… Hachiman. I am not a master when it comes to interviews…"

"I know."

More than I'd like to anyway… But I also happened to be pretty poor at interviews. There was a time where I nonchalantly failed an interview of nothing for a part-time job, so not only did I run out on my duties at part-time jobs, I also ran away from interviews.

As I nostalgically drowned in my useless nature as a human being from the past, Isshiki stretched out her hands all the way to the laptop from behind me and fiddled with it. She then let out a voice of realization as if convinced of something.

I questioned her with a look wondering what happened. Isshiki then nodded. "But you know, wouldn't Yui-senpai totally pass something like this?"

"Huh, why's that? I'm totally bad with tests, though…" Surprised from the sudden call, Yuigahama let out a discorded voice. As she looked at Isshiki with blinking eyes, Isshiki scrolled down on the screen.

"Ah, no. Just looking at this picture gives me the feeling they're kinda similar to us, so I thought it'd be super easy since they'd probably let cute people in."

"Well, that's fair."

If we put aside the written exam, Yuigahama seems like she'd be good with interviews. She could probably communicate with those enthusiastic, go-go guys.

When I nodded to Isshiki's statement, Yuigahama who found it surprising to be evaluated like that blushed. As she rubbed the hair bun on her head, she shot glances at me. "R-Really?"

"Yeah. If it's you, Yuigahama, you seem like you could fit right in with this annoying happy-go-lucky atmosphere."

"That's your reason!? I got happy for nothing…" Yuigahama dropped her shoulders and looked away. *No, no, it's not like I said you weren't cute or anything, yes. I was just saying that if it's you, you could easily fit in with these*

enthusiastic, go-go university students, yes. It's just, you know, I don't think it's a good thing if you let those people drag you into their pace!

"Well, how about this? Uh, people judge you based on your appearance, but what's important is the inside… In fact, I'd say it's better to avoid these clubs that evaluate you based on your appearance and enthusiasm. Probably, not that I'd know."

"Eh? Mmm, well, I guess so. Yeah…" Yuigahama didn't seem to be in full agreement, but she reluctantly nodded and turned back my way.

Listening from beginning to end, Isshiki blurted out in a small voice as if appalled. "…Senpai, you're super bad at following up."

Buzz off. If I was good at it, I wouldn't be ditching my interviews at all.

"Inside, huh…? In that case, I'm not sure what to think of a gathering of only people with the same values. I can't imagine them seeking to grow if they're enclosed in a homogenous and monopolized environment…" Yukinoshita who had been lending her ear to the conversation from the side looked at the website and opened her mouth in doubt.

Zaimokuza then hit his hand. "…Hapon. So what you are saying is, if I were to give an example, a producer of a certain game company makes a game that completely bombs because he readily decided to make a game out of an original work of some other publisher and refusing to publish a game due to how hard it'd be with the game being copyrighted by other companies due to a certain, super giant publisher monopolizing the game magazines…! I presume it is something of that nature?"

"I have no idea what you're saying because you're talking about all this complicated stuff, and I'm sure you're talking about something entirely else, but that's probably it."

I responded appropriately indicating what the heck are you talking about—in short, what the—and Zaimokuza made a big nod. "As I thought! The truth is written on the internet, after all!'

Wow, the internet is amazing. What do you search for that to come up? Damn this master of search. Still, for generations to come, I had the feeling search experts would become a necessity. It's a talent of the current generation.

When I became impressed—in a certain sense— with him, Zaimokuza blazed in an aura of combativeness. "…Damn them! So the one truly at fault for my undiscovered talent and my inability to make a debut is the evil empire, a certain, super giant gigantic publisher, and their monopoly of the marketplace, correct!?"

"You're wrong."

Yeah, yeah, just start writing first, okay?

× × ×

We took a break for tea time and convened again in front of the laptop.

Since the earlier “Absolute Best Unofficial Offers! kenken’s Journal of “Successful” Job Hunting Experiences at Publishers!!” wasn’t very informative, we decided to look for other similar websites.

On some of the job hunting websites, there were comments from people with actual jobs and company application overviews, so they turned out to be good references.

And on them, we came across some shocking figures.

“The success rates for major publishers are really crazy… Thousands of people apply and only fifteen of them are employed…?”

“There’s no precise number on the total number of applicants since it isn’t formally announced, but it should be about two hundred to three hundred times that amount.”

After hearing the numbers Yukinoshita gave from an approximate calculation, Yuigahama sighed in admiration. “Woow, becoming an editor sounds really tough.”

“This is just the total number of people employed, so if we take other department assignments into consideration, the number of people who can become a publishing editor should be less.”

Yukinoshita’s statement was plausible. There are likely people who belonged to general affairs and sales operations, so the editorial department should vary as well. For the light novel division that

Zaimokuza was aiming for in particular, there’d be at most one or two people. For new employees, if they got unlucky, it’s possible they wouldn’t be delegated to any departments.

“M-Mmph… G-Gununu… If that is how things are, becoming a light novel author seems far simpler…”

“Maybe.”

If we consider the success rates alone, it might just be easier to work as a light novel author for GaGaGa Bunko. They didn’t interview light novel authors there, after all.

While we’re at it, we might as well check on the success rates of making your debut as a light novel author at GaGaGa Bunko. When I reached my hand out to search, my hand was grabbed from behind.

“S-Senpai, pl-please wait a moment.”

Isshiki’s voice was trembling when she stopped my hand.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

Going “Mm! Mm!”, Isshiki wagged the tip of her finger and pointed at the screen.

“Look at this! Look!”

What’s the deal…? I thought. When I looked, she was pointing at a comment made by an employee from a certain publisher. He introduced himself and provided information on his job: the university he graduated from, what his job entailed, an approximate time schedule of one working day a week, and so forth. As I followed the lines one by one, my eyes stopped at one.

“A salary of ten million yen at age twenty five…”

You’ve got to be lying, no way. Major publishers really are amazing… Only three years out of university and he was already making that much? On top of that, he gets raises while he gets paid that salary? This guy’s like a total winner…

I sat there trembling in shock and I could hear deep breathing noises from behind. When I turned around, Isshiki placed her left hand to her cheek and showed a sweet and poppy smile. “I’m going to marry a publishing editor.”

“No, wait, calm down. If anything, I’m the one that’s going to marry a publishing editor.”

“You’re the one that needs to calm down…”

When Yukinoshita told me in disbelief, I came back to my senses. Indeed, I might’ve lost my composure there. On second thought, ten million yen wasn’t that amazing. I’m Hachiman, so that means there’s eighty thousand of me. That was exactly enough for one hundred and twenty-five of me. Imagine how annoying it’d be with that many of me. That’s why ten million wasn’t that big of a deal! I was more than enough by myself and it’s exactly because I was alone that there was value!

As I nodded to my own mysterious logic used to convince myself, Yuigahama on the side groaned. “Editor… Editor, huh… Mmm…”

“Well, isn’t having some kind of goal in itself a good thing? I’ve been trying hard everyday towards my goal since a while ago, after all.”

“Hoh, a goal…” I gave Isshiki a scrutinizing glance to see what she truly meant when she had uttered something so unlike her.

But there, she placed her index finger to her chin and tilted her head. “Of course, I plan on retiring after several years by getting married, you know?”

“Just where exactly are you putting in the effort…?” said Yukinoshita, sighing.

Isshiki puffed her cheeks. “I mean, I’m not very good at studying and there isn’t anything I want to do…”

“I totally get you. I’m like that, too…” Yuigahama dropped her shoulders and slumped over. Isshiki confirmed with her from behind. And as if realizing something, she lifted her head and looked at Yukinoshita.

“Oh, but Yukinoshita-senpai, you seem like you’ll jump straight into working.”

Yukinoshita blinked her eyes to her unexpected statement.

“I’m…” Yukinoshita stumbled, thinking the subject wouldn’t be directed to her. Her open lips were on the verge of saying something only to be promptly sealed shut.

When she averted her eyes down, her long eyelashes curved downwards. In doing that, her hair smoothly swayed, giving a glimpse of her slender neck as well as highlighting her white skin, causing me to instinctively catch my breath.

Her hands that were atop her skirt in a well-mannered fashion moved ever so slightly and she delicately squeezed her fingers little by little.

“I wonder. That’s what I thought before… But now, I’m not so sure yet,” Yukinoshita lifted her face and said, wearing a smile as though she was embarrassed.

“Well, I guess sooo. It’s still something much later in the future, after all.” Isshiki said lightheartedly.

Isshiki stated lightheartedly, but no voice followed after hers.

I think Yuigahama and I hadn’t been listening to her.

Because Yukinoshita’s answer had been a little unexpected.

There weren’t very many students who could give a straightforward answer regarding their futures. However, I thought—just somewhat vaguely—that Yukinoshita had already properly thought out her future. Perhaps I might’ve just been selfishly forcing my illusions on her, but even so, an unusual sense of discomfort was lodged in my heart.

I rested my cheeks in my hands on the table and made a sidelong glance at Yukinoshita. When she noticed, she tilted her head curiously at me, waiting for me to say something.

She looked at me inquisitively with an “um…” and I lightly shook my head, telling her that it’s nothing. She then retracted her chin and nodded back.

…Well, even Yukinoshita’s just a second year in high school. There’s nothing wrong with her not having figured out what she wanted to for the future yet. In fact, if she’s choosing not to say anything because it’s still unclear to her, that can be her reason, too.

When I reached that point in my mind, I gulped down the sense of discomfort and moved my gaze forward.

My eyes then met with Zaimokuza who had been groaning with his arms crossed. “Hachiman, what about you?”

“Hm, me?”

“I don’t think there’s any point in asking Hikki…” Yuigahama looked at me with cold eyes and I nodded back.

“Well, I guess. Fundamentally, I want to be a full-time house husband.”

“Yep, I knew it…”

“I suggest looking up what ‘fundamentally’ means…”

Yuigahama hung her head while Yukinoshita pressed her temple with closed eyes. There, Isshiki tapped my shoulder. When I turned around, her eyes sparkled and as if to talk in secret, she placed her hand to her mouth and whispered near my ears. “Senpai, I recommend becoming an editor.”

“I won’t become one, I won’t work, and I won’t look for a job.” I answered, while twisting my body to get away from the fluffy smell of Anna Sui and her ticklish breaths.

“Besides, it’s not that easy to become a publishing editor. Well, if you started trying hard now, then that’s a different story.”

“Umuu, for just how many years must I try from this point on… That sounds painful…”

Zaimokuza held his head as he groaned. Suddenly, his eyes shot open, his back straightened, and he roared.

“…Indeed, it is not an easy feat to become a light novel author! I knew it, light novel authors are NUMBER ONE! Now then, Hachiman, we cannot dawdle any longer! Let us begin on a new piece of work!”

Before he finished, Zaimokuza ran to the door. He stopped at the door and then turned around. “Hachimaaan! Hurry, hurry!”

With how he was hopping up and down and calling to me, he clearly looked like someone suspicious, but for him to have that kind of cheerful smile, it’s a mystery why it felt so pleasant.

“Why don’t you go with him?”

“Yep, yep.”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama said with wry smiles.

“…Well, I’m in charge of him, so I guess I ought to.” I deliberately stated to give up and make my decision and stood up.

At the same time, as for Irohasu, she was fiddling with the computer and searching something.

“I wonder if free newspapers are pretty easy to do…?”

You are way too indifferent towards Zaimokuza, you know…

× × ×

The sky I gazed up at from the window seat was blue and refreshingly clear. Yet strangely enough, it felt awfully bleak and didn't feel warm at all. Perhaps this was the effects of the noiseless atmosphere in the library.

With no other patrons besides us, the library after school was near empty. It's likely there's a library assistant beyond the circulation desk, but the person showed no signs of appearing.

Sitting to my diagonal opposite, Zaimokuza had been grinding his mechanical pencil against his notes for a while now, but eventually halted.

Either he had run out of steam or was all out of ideas, Zaimokuza momentarily sat there in a daze. Suddenly, he said, "Fumu, must I become a light novel author in the end, after all…? I will be unable to marry a voice actor."

"You're excluding most occupations if marrying a voice actor is a must-have requirement, you know… Publishing editors are on the same boat."

"I see. Being a light novel author is no good and becoming a publishing editor is also impossible…" said Zaimokuza, groaning. But then, his eyes flashed and he stood up yelling in a strange voice.

"I have got it! In that case, this means the today's modern era is all about directors! I will make an anime! Don-don-donuts, let's go nuts![17]"

His bawling voice echoed throughout the quiet library room. I couldn't help but break into a bitter smile when the echoing stopped.

"…Well, if that makes you happy, that's fine." I said."

Zaimokuza blinked in surprise. "Mu, why are you saying something an old boyfriend would say…? H-Hey, stop that. W-We're not in that kinda relationship, right…?"

"Don't get all red and nervous, that's really gross. I just gave up on you, idiot. Whatever, just get to writing. I can't go home."

"Mu. True… Fine, let's get to writing."

Zaimokuza's energy from when he screamed out had up and vanished somewhere and then he turned dejectedly obedient. As he pulled his shoulders in together, he began writing something on his notes. *Ohh, I guess you still plan on writing your light novel, huh? How surprising.*

Even the Zaimokuza who exhibited no signs of growth was changing little by little. Although he was traveling on all kinds of paths like escape paths, short paths, circular paths, and so forth, he was aiming for his destination. Though in Zaimokuza's case, his destination of marrying a voice actor was more or less doomed.

But even so, just like how he'd finish his writing word by word and sentence by sentence, he'd continue to accumulate years in his life and would mark his eventual departure from his nest.

There’s roughly only about one year until I graduated from high school. After that, assuming I was to make it through prep school and university without a hitch, it’d be approximately five years until my entry into society.

Five years.

It sounded like an incredible amount of time, yet it felt like it would go by in the blink of an eye. I think that as we continue to grow, the period of a year gradually becomes shorter and shorter. And surely enough, the length of this year of time wouldn’t be the same as the next years to come.

And I’m certain that it wasn’t just the length, but also their values.

It’s possible that this trivial moment as I gazed up at the bleak sky might have some kind of value.

That’s why for now, I think I’ll continue to look up at this parched, yet beautiful sky for a little longer.

そのとき

材木座義輝」で
しばしばお仕事が簡単に
見つかるやつ。

Chapter 2

Surely, **Isshiki Iroha** is made of sugar and spice, and something nice.

The heater clonked and clonked.

The heater that was installed in the clubroom had been put to use for a considerable amount of time. With it operating for so long, it was seemingly starting to show signs of wear. Either the fan got stuck, the motor had issues, or the frame was warped somewhere.

Around the time it became evening after school, our little heater started making peculiar noises as if to announce the end of club activities.

I didn't pay it much attention since I had been focused on reading and listening to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita chatting. Though the instant they went quiet, the noise became audible.

Yukinoshita who had her gaze dropped to her paperback book stopped turning the pages of her book and looked at the heater near the window. The same noise was apparently bothering her as well.

"…It's rather peaceful today, isn't it?"

"I know, right? It's kinda relaxing."

Yuigahama stretched out her hand, which had been fiddling with her cellphone, to her mug. Similarly, I grabbed my teacup and gulped down the tea lacking in warmth.

After we both breathed out with satisfaction, the clonking noise filled the room that turned silent once again. Even Yuigahama eventually found the heater concerning and looked at it.

We never really did notice how incessant the noise of the heater was. It might've been because Isshiki had dropped by so often recently.

Of course, it's not because she's annoying or loud or noisy or talkative, but our attention naturally shifted to something else whenever she wasn't around. And every time Isshiki visited us, she'd bring some kind of good-for-nothing request, so things just end up becoming hectic.

So with all that had happened, it's been a while since the room had been this peaceful.

As I helped myself to warm tea and sweets, I'd read my book absentmindedly while listening the exchange between a collected voice and a cheery voice, occasionally contributing with my own.

No visitors, no work, only a mellow atmosphere. Becoming familiar with this situation made it seem more like your regular every day of trivialities, but even so, it's a wonderful feeling being able to experience it after so long. Because of that, the persistent noise of the heater was like the sound of a light shower in the early afternoon, resembling a rhythm with elegance.

I closed my book and looked towards the window while listening to the noise of the heater.

I gazed into the sunset absentmindedly and Yukinoshita spoke up.

"Shall we call it a day?"

"Oh yeah, it doesn't look like anyone's gonna come, anyway," Yuigahama replied. She took the last cookie going, "Last cookie's mine!" and started cleaning up the tea cakes.

Yukinoshita and I promptly got ready to head home while checking that the doors were locked. In addition to confirming the locked windows, I moved my hand to the switch of the heater.

"Good work," I said, and flipped the switch. Upon turning it off, the clonking halted. Considering the cold season was going to continue for a little longer, it might not hurt to ask Hiratsuka-sensei to see if we could get the heater examined and repaired.

After adjusting our coats and scarves, we exited into the hallway. Yukinoshita locked the door to the room.

With this, today's business hours were now over.

Now that work was over, all that's left was to head straight home. When we walked down the hallway of the special building away from the clubroom, Yuigahama shivered and adjusted the front of her coat. "…Yikes! The hallway's freezing!"

The emptiness of the hallway wasn't the reason why it had been so cold. It felt like a chill was crawling upwards starting from my feet. I squeezed my scarf and tightened it.

"I guess it's just more noticeable since the room was pretty warm."

"The hallway isn't installed with heaters, after all." Yukinoshita trotted forward as if telling her to deal with it. Yuigahama was walking beside her and had a contemplative face while rubbing her scarf.

"Mmm… Oh, I know!" she said, and then hugged Yukinoshita's arm. "It should be a little warmer if I do this!"

"Y-Yuigahama-san, wait just a moment." Yukinoshita staggered, her voice sharpening and her eyes becoming resistant. But after she saw Yuigahama's melting face, she sighed and gave in.

"…Ooooh, so warm."

“It’s hard to walk…”

In reality, their temperatures shouldn’t have been all that different, but apparently their heat indexes were. *Just the sight of those two is enough to warm me up!*

Even after Yukinoshita had returned the key to the faculty office, Yuigahama continued to glue herself to her.

I followed the two who were tangled around each other and advanced through the hallway that led to the entrance. On the way there, a familiar face appeared from inside the student council room.

“Oh, it’s Iroha-chan. Yahallo.” Yuigahama lifted her left hand and waved, her right hand still grasping onto Yukinoshita’s arm. After noticing her, Isshiki rushed over to us.

“Ahh, good evening. I’m glad you’re all still here.”

“We’re already on our way home,” Yukinoshita said, Yuigahama still attached to her.

You’d think these two were flirting if you saw them from afar… At this point, it wouldn’t be odd to find them strange, but that’s Isshiki for you. She must’ve gotten used to it because she didn’t seem particularly fazed and answered back like normal. “I was also done with some things on my end as well, so I was thinking I’d drop by or something.”

“Did you need something?”

“Yes, I do actually,” Isshiki said, nodding. As if being wary of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, she motioned to me and whispered, “Senpai, can I bother you for a second?”

“Huh? Yeah… sure…” I sent a look to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama telling them to head on home first and they nodded back. With Isshiki pulling me along by my sleeve, we approached the window at the end of the hallway.

The sky was colored in twilight and the wind that slapped the window seemed cold. With her back facing the window, Isshiki apprehensively asked, “Um, senpai, what’s going on with the work I asked you for help with before? I’d like to come to a decision on it already…”

“Hm, yeah. I got it. I’ll do something about it.”

Hearing “work” caused me to respond mostly with the motivation that a corporate slave would have. *It’s kind of a problem if I have to talk about work on my way home. Today’s Service Club business hours were over. Please come back another day with your request. It’s cold and I want to go home.*

I turned around after giving a vague, lukewarm response and Isshiki’s voice came at me from behind. “Oh. Then, is it okay if we meet tomorrow at ten in the morning in front of Chiba Station?”

“Huh? Tomorrow?” I turned around instinctively and checked.

Tomorrow was a day off. The Hikigaya household adopted the system of two full days of weekly holidays. So if I was told to rest, I was going to rest. However, the problem was that the Service Club adopted the system of two days of weekly holiday. These two systems happened to be different. The more you know. Anyway, that means whenever Service Club duties were brought up, I had this feeling of needing to work even on Saturdays and Sundays. *On second thought, that’s not even a system of two days of weekly holiday, is it? What’s with this sweatshop club…?*

“No, I don’t think tomorrow’s going to work…”

I gave an appropriate response for the time being to ensure my weekends and Isshiki moved her index finger to her chin and tilted her head. “But I doubt there’s anything to do though?”

“Don’t give me that, you think I’d know…?”

It’s been bugging me every time, but why does Isshiki always talk under the assumption I knew everything? Like I’d know what her plans were. I don’t know everything, I just know what I know.[1]

After telling her, Isshiki slyly puffed her cheeks. “I mean, it’s senpai we’re talking about.”

“Oh, you were talking about me… Wait, why is this about me now? Isn’t this kind of weird? Well, you’re right that I don’t have anything to do though…”

“See, I knew it. In that case, I’ll be counting on you tomorrow. I’m looking forward to seeing you in action, senpai! I’ll be excusing myself now.”

“S-Sure…”

Isshiki made a bright smile, ended the conversation, and waved her hands in goodbye. Gosh! Irohasu, that’s such a nice smile! Your face was telling me you wouldn’t let me say no, ask any questions, or check over the details with you at all!

Aw crap, did I make some kinda promise or something…? If she mentioned work, I think Isshiki should’ve asked me for help with something… Aw crap, I, like, totally ain’t got a clue, man…

Having been coerced by Isshiki’s smile, I started walking towards the entrance.

After walking a few steps, I glanced around back at Isshiki and she was still waving her hand with a smile.

Well, it’s me we’re talking about here. It’s possible she was just saying something whatever was necessary for the time being like I did earlier. In fact, that seems like the only possibility. The details were the issue…

But unable to remember a single thing, I buried my face into my scarf and puffed while thinking, but nothing ultimately came to mind.

I wracked my brain while heading to the entrance and I could see Yuigahama and Yukinoshita idly chatting in place. It looks like I made them wait for me.

“Ahh, sorry. You guys could’ve just gone home without me…” I said.

Yuigahama vigorously spun around when I called out to them. In that moment, she dragged Yukinoshita along with her, still holding onto her. *You know what she reminded me of? Like a dog who suddenly started moving around on its own in the middle of a walk.*

“We weren’t exactly waiting. Like, it’s just after Yukinon and I were talking, we kinda stood around… right?”

“…I suppose.” Yukinoshita abruptly turned her face away when Yuigahama asked her. Seeing her act like that was similar to a cat who disliked being hugged.

“Oh. Well, you know… thanks for that.”

I thanked them and they both shook their heads. Seeing their truly trivial gestures was oddly embarrassing that I walked out after slipping on my loafers.

When we made it outside, it was already dark around us. It may have been nearing the first day of spring, but it looks like we had to wait a little longer before the day got longer.

As we headed to the main gate from the entrance, Yuigahama walked beside me. “What did Iroha-chan say?”

“Well, I really don’t know… Apparently it’s for work, but I really don’t know…”

“That’s not a very clear explanation…” Yukinoshita said with disbelief and a smile, walking a step from behind us.

However, it’s a frequent occurrence for work to not come with very good explanations. As a matter of fact, the current Service Club activities were more or less given no explanation whatsoever… Though, since I had undergone situations where having an explanation beforehand would’ve made everything much easier, having reports, communication, and consultations were really important, after all.

Heck, you didn’t even need to work as long you had those. Imagine if some important person told you something, you could just snap back at him with, “I made sure to report, communicate, and consult with you, didn’t I!?” You might be able to avoid responsibility that way!

So with that in mind, let’s try to skip out on work tomorrow, too!

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A day off with clear winter skies. The front of Chiba Station was bustling with activity.

I imagine the city area was much worse, but this chaos was more than enough for me since I very rarely go out on the weekends.

I made a sidelong glance at the people going back and forth through the front of the station and checked the time. It was ten fifteen in the morning.

It was already past the appointed time and Isshiki was still nowhere to be seen. As much as I'd like to confirm the time with Isshiki, I didn't have her number and was out of luck.

When you said to meet in front of Chiba Station, that should unmistakably be the east entrance, but it's possible that it meant the west entrance instead… No, it's probable that it could refer to the Keisei-Chiba Station as well. After all, they used to call the Keisei-Chiba Station, the National Chiba Railway *Front* Station—seriously… which station was it? The word front was in its name… If not that, there's also Nishi-Chiba Station, Higashi-Chiba Station, Hon-Chiba Station, Shin-Chiba Station, Chiba-Minato Station, Chiba-Koen Station, Chiba-Chuuei Station, or perhaps, Chiba Newtown Station and the ridiculous number of lines with Chiba in their names. For Chiba beginners, this might just be a tad too difficult to process.

When someone from Chiba Prefecture or Chiba City said, "I'm going to Chiba"; make no mistake, they were saying they were going to check around the area of Chiba Station. This might not be very intuitive to people from other regions. Say, for people from Hokkaido, you'd have no idea what they were referring to when they stated, "I'm going to Hokkaido. Or for people from Tokyo, "I'm going to Tokyo" sounded as if they were going to chase their dreams and becoming something BIG.

So as I thought about how meeting at the front of the station in Chiba meant here, I stomped on the floor to divert my attention from the cold while waiting. Then, within the waves of people, I could see Isshiki.

Wearing a fur scarf, her beige coat was tightly zipped up at the front. With her boats firmly worn at her feet and a short, plaited skirt, she didn't appear to be very cold. Her boots with slightly raised heels weakly struck the ground.

Once she noticed me, she jogged over. After wrapping her scarf around her neck again, fiddling with her bangs and letting out a small breath, she lifted her face.

"I'm sorry for making you wait. It took a while for me to get ready…"

"No, I seriously had to wait," I said in discontent with the adding meaning, *Irohasu, you're soooo slow.*

Isshiki frowned. "Um, aren't you supposed to say you just got here…? We're going on a date, after all."

"…A date?"

Now that's a word you don't hear every day… Could this be something similar to that ritual where you had to soften up a rampaging spirit by accompanying her…?[2] And then there would be a battle! Or something like that. Yeah right, like

there would be any battles. Generally speaking, a date meant an outing between a boy and a girl.

But why was I suddenly going out with Isshiki, anyway…? I must've been wearing that doubt on my face because Isshiki placed her hands on her waist and sighed in disbelief. "I told you before, didn't I? That you should think about a date course."

"…Ahh."

Speaking of which, she did say something like that last month. She was actually serious when she said that? I do recall giving her a random answer without thinking about it too much back then. Crap! I didn't think she'd take it as a commitment on my part!

"Well, you could've let me know in advance if that was the case. Even I need to prepare and stuff… you know?"

For example, cram up my schedule and refuse, or push back the plan forever without making a decision, or suddenly have stomach pains on the day of, or stuff like that. Well, I get the feeling nothing would've changed even if she told me beforehand though. Whenever you made exciting plans well in advance and the day finally came around, you'd end up thinking, "Okay, going sounds like a total pain…" What's with that phenomenon?

Though I tried voicing my objection, it didn't seem to have any effect as Isshiki's attitude didn't budge.

"I mean, if I invited you normally senpai, there's no way you'd come, right?"

"…That's true."

You're quite something. She understood me enough that she could probably receive a third grade Hikigaya certificate.

In any case, it's my blunder that I let her assume I had made a commitment. It's a little too late to give any excuses and disband. Part of the reason why this situation happened was due to me not giving it any thought and giving her a half-hearted answer. It'd be simply irresponsible to just abandon the job here.

So the smart thing to do would be to quickly finish up the work and head on home.

"Alright, let's go." I nodded and Isshiki finally smiled. "So, where to?"

The instant I asked her, Isshiki's smile broke. With a profound sigh, she pouted in displeasure. "So the first thing you do is rely on the girl… I was under the impression you'd think of something…"

"I only get excited about formulating intricate plans when I'm alone, but when I'm with other people, my style is to follow them from behind."

"Just forget it… Let's figure out where to go while we walk around instead! It's really cold here." Isshiki's shoulders dropped in resignation. She promptly

rewrapped her scarf around her neck to take back her composure and she started walking off with her heels tapping the floor. *Yep, yep, it looks like Irohasu has finally gotten used to my pace.*

By the way, just who was it again that made me wait this entire time in the freezing weather…?

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We walked down the long street that continued to the entertainment district in the city from the front of the station.

This district could be called a portion of Chiba's main street which was aligned with restaurants, entertainment facilities, and commerce establishments. Since it's a weekend, there were numerous people coming and going. Students often stopped by here during their weekdays and evenings and it's also happened to be a very familiar place to me.

If we were to continue further, we'd arrive at an area I'd usually go to that had a concentration of movie theaters, book stores, and arcades.

Furthermore, if we made a left, we'd arrive at the PARCO store, and if we were to stroll around Chiba, there'd be passing streets and then some. Today was seeing crowded pedestrian traffic as if everyone all carried the same thoughts.

Although I was used to traveling down these streets, things just felt different when you were with a girl. Walking side by side was supposed to be natural, but unless I was conscious of my hurrying feet, I might've ended up leaving Isshiki behind. I let out a shallow breath, regained my composure, and dropped my speed more than usual, walking a half step ahead while keeping Isshiki in mind.

As I walked ahead while avoiding people passing by me, Isshiki slightly hurried her pace from behind and walked beside me. Pitching her upper body forward by a little, she looked up at my face from below.

"Senpai, where do you usually go?"

"Home."

"Try again."

"R-Right…"

Isshiki's tone turned sharper than normal and she glared at me with half-closed eyes.*You're kind of scaring me, Iroha-chan.* With Isshiki's silent intensity pressuring me, I coughed and corrected myself.

"Either the library or the book store. I can kill plenty of time and it's typically fun for me when I go to either of them."

"A library date…" Isshiki whispered with a doubtful look and then moved her gaze to the sky. After a moment of seemingly thinking, she promptly bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, something that intellectual seems more like something Hayama-senpai would do, so I’d like something more junk-oriented from you, senpai.”

Oh hoh, this little girl… There were plenty of things about me that were intellectual in regards to my grades, you know? Then again, it’s not like I wanted to go to the library with Isshiki either, so it’s not a big deal.

I mean, right now, I was pretty darn nervous, so even if I were to go somewhere quiet with Isshiki, I don’t think I’d be able to calm down. I felt like a dad who wanted to relax on the weekends, but was forced into taking care of the kids instead. So following that logic, it’s likely I’d be able to read in peace if I were to go to the library with Hayama. Oh my gosh! Didn’t I, like, just totally imagine going on a date with Hayama-kun to the library!? Hawawa![3] Could you imagine how problematic things would get if Ebina-san knew I was imagining something like that!? No, seriously.

But since I didn’t care the slightest about Hayama, let’s just chase him out of the corners of my head for all of eternity. I racked my brains over other general places people would go to.

“There’s karaoke, darts, billiards, bowling, table tennis… Batting centers work too, but there aren’t any around Chiba Station…”

I asked Isshiki with a look as to whether any of those options were to her liking, and she opened her mouth with an earnest countenance. “I don’t really care, but billiards don’t suit you at all, senpai.”

“Buzz off.”

“Oh, but table tennis definitely does!”

“You really didn’t need to add that…”

Actually, aren’t you being a little malicious by saying it like that…? Table tennis is awesome, you know? Ever heard of “Ping Pong”? The manga and anime were really cool.

In having that exchange, we arrived at the large Gosaro intersection and were stopped by the traffic lights.

We’d be heading to PARCO if we turned left here and we’d be going to the movie theaters if we went straight. The choice was between left and straight since there wasn’t anything to note to the right.

“…How about we check out the movies then? We can kill two hours.”

“Why are we going to kill time…? Well, you’re the one in charge here, senpai…”

“Alright, movie it is.”

Isshiki seemed a bit reluctant, but since I managed to get her consent, I moved my legs towards the direction of the movie theaters.

Given that it’s a weekend, the movie theaters were thriving.

As I looked at the movie showtimes and the seat availability, Isshiki pointed at an extraordinary, Hollywood-esque poster. It was gaudily labeled as an "Academy Award nominee."

"I want to watch this."

"Alright, I'll watch this one."

I, on the other hand, chose a movie that had no relevance to Academy Awards. Both movies ended at nearly the same time, so the both of us should be out of the theater almost simultaneously.

"Now we just need a place to meet afterwards. You okay with the Starbucks below?"

My nature didn't place me in the habit of watching movies with other people, so I decided on something that seemed reasonable. As a matter of fact, I even took into account the length of both movies, so why was Iroha-chan making such a dumbfounded face?

"…Huh? What?" I asked.

Isshiki nodded her head, finding something convincing. "I see. So things turn out that way because you respond like that."

I have no idea what light bulb turned on for you, but I'm glad you understand. Isshiki let out a sigh of disbelief and looked away from the display of movie showtimes. Her gaze then stopped.

When I followed her gaze, there was a bowling alley signboard. At the bottom, there were words about table tennis tables.

After checking that, Isshiki turned towards me. "Okay, scratch the movie, why don't we play table tennis instead?"

"That's fine with me, but won't those shoes make it a bit hard?" I said, while looking at Isshiki's boots. Isshiki stopped, made fixated looks at her feet, and then directed her gaze at my face.

Her cherubic appearance with her mouth agape from surprise or shock made me realize again that Isshiki was a girl younger than me.

Her curious face that was looking my way was on the verge of saying something.

"Wh-What?"

"Nothing… I just thought it was a little unexpected for you to be so observant…"

"I can tell without looking since I'm looking at a different height than usual," I said.

Isshiki took a step towards me as if purposely confirming that and faced me. In taking a step back to open up our distance, Isshiki would raise her eyebrow and

close that step again. Apparently, she was telling me to stay still. I slightly leaned backwards and Isshiki looked up at me. And with breaths spilling out through her smiling lips, she weaved her words.

"Oh, that's true. Your height's much closer than before."

Due to the close proximity of our faces compared to normal, I instinctively swallowed my breath when I noticed her glossy, smiling lips.

As I stood there unable to say anything, even Isshiki was bewildered by our close distance and looked away with slightly red cheeks. Then, she looked at me timidly and acted shy to play it off.

"…Well, I guess you can just rent some shoes then." I averted my eyes from Isshiki and took a step towards the bowling alley. Isshiki let out a short reply in affirmation and followed me from behind.

Jeez, just how sly can this junior of mine be…?

But along with that slyness of hers, Isshiki was more or less cute, so that made it even worse.

Because truthfully, she had a cute face. Her gestures were sly, but cute. Her personality… well, there were plenty of issues with it, but the way she'd act sly and innocent could be considered cute.

Crap, what the heck? She sure is cute. She's like the school academy's idol! It's Iroha-chan, you know! It wouldn't be unnatural if that actually happened… No, it definitely would be.

That slyness and cuteness, however, was directed at Hayama Hayato, and not me, so I was able to stay composed. I'mma pretty darn sure I'd fall for her first trap had I been the same as my pure and younger self, ya know…?

By intentionally thinking in a different accent, I faced my identity as a citizen of Chiba, solidifying my love for my hometown and was able to calm down. Phew, close one. If it wasn't for my love for Chiba, Irohasu's slyness would've completely annihilated me. Thank you, Chiba. I love you, Chiba.

Now that I took back my composure, I also recalled today's objective. My assignment was to design a date course for Isshiki's outing with Hayama.

When we got onto the passage of the shopping area of the station, I turned around to Isshiki when the bowling alley was visible and checked with her. "Actually, does Hayama even play table tennis? Wouldn't something more stylish be better?"

"That's exactly why table tennis is good! I won't be able to differentiate myself from others if I just take Hayama-senpai somewhere he'd normally go, right?"

"Makes sense…"

When she mentioned it, that's true. Isshiki's current rival Miura wasn't likely to invite Hayama to something like table tennis. So in that sense, Isshiki could distinguish herself that way. Though, I wasn't sure if she'd come off positively or negatively. Then again, I doubt Hayama would even care either way…

Well, this was for my cute junior and all, so let's do the best I can.

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We headed to the bowling alley near the movie theater, checked in at the reception, and went to the table tennis tables towards the corner.

We took a seat on the nearby leather sofas and changed our shoes.

Isshiki took a seat next to me, took off her coat, and began changing out of her boots.

The pink-knitted sweater underneath her coat was moderately slender while emphasizing her feminine curves, her high-waist skirt showing her waistline. When she uneasily removed her boots with her hands, I could tell the fineness of her calves through her tights.

I ended up directing my gaze towards her seemingly immature gestures. When our eyes met, she bended her head to side with a "What is it?" But there's no way I could tell her that I was taken in her by the unbalanced qualities between her alluring charm and her childish behavior, so I shook my head and quietly handed her a racket.

After Isshiki bowed her head and accepted the racket, she trotted to the front of the table tennis table while fanning herself.

"I haven't played table tennis since middle school."

"You can pick it in P.E. when you become a second year."

I stood across from Isshiki on the other end of the table. Isshiki rolled up her knitted sleeves and pointed her racket at me. She then made a… knitted a smile in determination!

"So if I win, can you treat me to lunch?"

"We're betting lunch, huh? Well, I guess that's fine…" I answered, and tossed a table tennis ball to Isshiki. I guess there's no better way to hype up the match than putting down a wager. After bouncing the ball on the table, Isshiki grabbed it and readied her racket.

"We're decided then…! Okay, I'll start first. Ey."

Isshiki flatly grunted when she weakly rallied the ball to me.

"Hoi."

I returned the ball that came straight at me without any extra strength. The return skillfully dropped in front of Isshiki and bounced to a perfect height for her. Isshiki grunted with a weak voice, "Toh!" and rallied the ball back.

The ping pong ball noisily bounced back and forth for a while.

Every time the ball made a bouncing noise, a sense of nostalgia would well within me. It reminded me of the time when I played with Komachi at the hot springs we visited as a family. Thanks to that, I was proficient at rallies for fun. My style more or less incorporated the playstyles of Mario Kart and Puyo Puyo. I mean, every time Komachi lost, she'd get a little upset…

I used my times as Komachi's opponent as a basis for the continuing rally of the balls to places that Isshiki could easily hit back.

"Tah."

"Hoi."

We rallied the ball back and forth while letting out flat grunts. It seems that one of my one hundred and eight onii-chan skills, "Entertain the little sister" had yet to go rusty.

At first, Isshiki had returned the balls nervously, but it looked like she had gotten used to it. *Looks like she'll be able to have fun now…* At the end of my thoughts, a suspicious glint appeared in Isshiki's eyes.

Isshiki gave a focused stare at the ball that bounced up, stepped in, did a large backswing, and smashed the ball.

"Dieeee!"

"Uh, why would you even say that…?"

The ball that Isshiki smashed flew in a large parabola and disappeared into the distance. It was gone, yet Isshiki had a triumphant smile going, “How’d you like that…!?” There’s no come-from-behind grand slam in table tennis, girl.

I went to pick up the ping pong ball. Although we resumed with my serve, I made some clumsy hits and it became Isshiki’s turn again to serve.

“Okay, so it’s my turn now, right?”

Isshiki bounced the ball on top of the table and took a serving stance. But as if she had noticed something, her gaze swam around and she lightly raised her hand to pause. “Oh, senpai, could you wai—HIYAH!”

Right about when she tried to pause the match, she made a sudden serve with all her energy. But I wasn’t one to fall for little acts like that. I calmly shifted over to the front of the ball and made a return ace to the opposite of where Isshiki stepped forward.

“…Too easy.”

My pops always used that trick with me in table tennis when I was younger, so in order to extract revenge, I’d do the same thing multiple times to Komachi, and she’d get so upset about it! I couldn’t have you underestimating the worthless genes of the Hikigaya household now! The way Komachi would really cry when she was a toddler and tell me, “I’m not gonna play table tennis with you anymore, onii-chan!” was just so cute…

Of course, Komachi had a tantrum since she was a child back then, but how would Irohasu, who was an adult now, react? When I looked at her, she was gritting her teeth as if her plans had been foiled.

“Grrr…”

“If you’re going to resort to things like that, I guess I’ll have to get serious…” I said, and took off my sweater. I rubbed the floor and took on the form of a table tennis athlete. When I did, Isshiki waved her racket in protest.

“S-Senpai, you’re being very childish!”

“Says you… Whatever, here I go. It’s my serve now.”

I was in a different mode from earlier’s handicapped mode for entertainment. I positioned myself at the corner and made a full-power serve. Even though Isshiki was complaining, she seemed awfully ready as she let out a short sigh and chased after the ball. “Uryah!”

And then, her racket cut through the air and the overenthusiastic Isshiki’s skirt fluttered. *Crap, now that I think about it, she’s wearing a skirt, isn’t she…? I’d better avoid hitting too many fast balls…*

After that, I returned back to handicapped mode and lightly returned the balls. But now that I was conscious of her skirt, my gaze would move on its own. Isshiki’s skirt flapping up and down just wouldn’t stop bothering me.

Tch! How cowardly!

What's cowardly? It's the table that would obscure my vision and absolutely keep me from seeing anything! What's with this defective sport…!? Oh, I know. What if someone invented a table tennis board made of "Clear and See-Through" skeletal material? It'd definitely get popular. Heck, I should invent it and get rich.

Either it's because I had idiotic thoughts or even the delusions about skirts, I repeatedly swung at air and Isshiki was able to score some points.

Isshiki let out a sigh and took out a mini-towel from her bag. She patted her face with her towel to wipe off the sweat and began counting something by bending her fingers.

"Ummm, so senpai has eight points right now, and I have… one, two, three, four… Oh, senpai, what time is it?"

As I pondered over this familiar and curious development, I looked at the clock on the wall and answered, "It's about eleven."

"Eleven. Okay. Ah, so my points are twelve, thirteen—"

"You have six points. Six."

You're being way too bold with the Time-Noodle[4] act. Just how many numbers did you skip over? Then again, you're pretty refined to know about an old rakugo story like that, Isshiki.

When I pointed it out to her, Isshiki pouted. But pouting wasn't going to get her anything here.

"Here, let's go."

I called out to her and did a light serve. I held back on the speed of the ball, but I aimed for a considerably difficult spot. Isshiki ran to one end of the table, but the ping pong ball mercilessly struck the edge with a *plonk* and bounced away.

Seeing it off, Isshiki made a smile and faced me. "Ah, that was out, so I get the point, right?"

"There wouldn't be a bouncing noise if it was out…"

What's with the straight-faced lie…?

For a while now, weren't her methods kind of unfair? And especially… the way her skirt was moving all around the place, I think that's totally unfair!

From then on, I was able to amass my points, making the occasional misses due to her skirt, and there was finally a winner.

The result was my complete victory.

We both took a seat at the nearest sofa when we finished our game. My breathing was a little rough since it had been a while since I played table tennis.

On the other hand, Isshiki's shoulders were dropped in dejection as if overcome with shock from losing… *You've still gotta long way to go!*

"…So it's my win, right?" I asked to confirm with her.

Isshiki reluctantly nodded. "I guess that's how it is… I'll take the loss this time…"

She was surprisingly honest in accepting her defeat despite her cowardly tactics from earlier. Had this been a certain sore loser, first or foremost, she would've been the one who'd win the match.

I wasn't one to dwell on my victories, but winning wasn't a bad feeling. I unknowingly spilled an unpleasant smile, but after seeing Isshiki's downcast look, I couldn't really laugh at her.

"Well, thanks for lunch." I restrained my smile with a cough and stated as nicely as possible. When I did, Isshiki's shoulders shook… *H-Huh, don't tell me you're crying, Irohasu? E-Eh, wh-what do I do…?*

As I freaked out, a low chuckle came from beside me.

"…Fufufu."

When I looked at her, Isshiki had a fearless smile.

"Huh, what? Something wrong?" I asked.

Isshiki placed her hands on her waist and pointed at me with a triumphant smile. "I said you had to treat me if I won, but I didn't say anything about you winning, senpai."

What in the world is she blabbering about…? I looked at her with a suspicious look and I recalled our conversation before the match… *Hmm?*

"……That's true."

Indeed, the only condition she gave was that if she won… Not bad, I definitely learned something here… The next time I challenge Komachi to something, this was what I'd use. Just the thought of Komachi showing me hate after so long got my chest jumping in joy… But you know, the things that Irohasu says and does were the absolute worst.

"Well, I wasn't really going to have you treat me from the start, so it's fine. But aren't you being just a little unfair…?" I retorted.

Isshiki, however, was rather unconcerned about that. Instead, she smiled.

She softly placed her hand on her bosom and slightly leaned forward, peeking into my face. Her eyes looked as if they were teasing me.

"Being a little unfair makes me more of a girl doesn't it?"

"Ahh, that so…"

Isshiki's words were ridiculous, yet strangely convincing. I think it was from Mother Goose about how girls were made of sugar and spice, and all things nice.

That really was true. Though in Isshiki's case, she had a bit of excess spice in her.

"…I don't really care, but don't expect that logic to work with every guy. Today's especially."

Indeed, there were serious people out in the world who'd stay merciless for the entire duration of a gamble where everyone would see you get extremely angry from losing at Daihinmin and everyone would laugh and say how funny that is.[5]

Well, I'm sure guys like Hayama and Tobe could enjoy that kind of enthusiasm and given Isshiki's appearance and communicative ability, I think she'd be forgiven for most situations. Heck, even I forgave her just now!

In thinking that, Isshiki made a sudden, meek look as if she understood what it was I was trying to tell her. She then waved her hand in rejection.

"No, no, no, I'm obviously not going to do that when I'm with Hayama-senpai. What am I gonna do if he ends up hating me?"

"…Well, I'm sure Hayama would be happier that way, though."

"Are you for real? Where'd you get that information?"

"Nowhere in particular."

Since Isshiki had abruptly leaned forward, I shifted away from her accordingly. Isshiki didn't approach any further and crossed her arms in thought. "It's not credible if your source is unclear… I don't think I'll be able to act that way just yet."

"What's the hurry? For the time being, he's—"

I was interrupted by Isshiki's sliding movement towards my side.

"That's why, for now…"

Isshiki stopped her words there and moved her lips to my ears as if to say something secretly with deceiving eyes at the end.

She added some spice smeared with sugar.

"You're the only one that I'll act this way with, senpai."

"You realize that's like saying it's okay for me to hate you, right…?" I said, retreating my upper body away from her. Isshiki chuckled.

No matter the amount of sugar you coated jalapenos with, they were still jalapenos. No matter the amount of syrup you mixed with Tabasco, it was still Tabasco.

Unless there's something nice, nothing would change.

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After we had some moderate body exercise, I was feeling hungry.

Isshiki who had been walking beside me tapped my shoulders as soon as we left the bowling alley. “Are you a little hungry?”

“Hm, yeah. I guess we should get something to eat.”

“Okay.”

I turned my face to her and answered and she smiled back. But she didn’t say anything more and only continued to smile.

Don’t tell me it’s time for me to pose the question…

I readied myself and frightfully opened my mouth. “Is there anything you want to eat?”

“Anything’s okay with me.”

Th-There it is! She’s the kind of person who’ll say anything’s fine when you ask her if she wants to eat anything!!!

Rumor had it that girls in society measured the levels of manliness in a boy based on their suggestions. The boys were getting tested… But I’d like to interject something.

It is possible that being aware of the fact that boys and girls share a mutual position in testing each other may be the key to success.

I want to send everyone these words.

“When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” (Nietzsche)

Crap, I became overly aware there for a second because of the “Absolute Best Unofficial Offers! kenken’s Journal of “Successful” Job Hunting Experiences at Publishers!!” from the other day. I must calm down and face reality again.

If I wasn’t anything different from the past, Isshiki’s question would’ve caused me to forget myself in anger and turn Super Sayian, but I was now an adult having accumulated all my recent experiences.

“How about pasta? Arrabbiata? Or maybe tagliata?”

“Why is it all pasta…?”

“Except tagliata isn’t pasta.”

It’s thinly sliced beef steak or something like that.

Isshiki’s eyebrow twitched as if she was annoyed by what I said. But she was, of course, barely able to keep her smile from breaking.

Though she looked happy on the outside, she clearly seemed upset inside. And with a prickling voice, she mumbled. “…Duh, but senpai, you sure do have a bad personality.”

“So do you,” I said.

Isshiki moved her index finger to her chin and sweetly tilted her head wondering what I was saying. “I’m told I have a good personality, though?”

Stating that with such a blunt expression showed how strong her heart was. True, she did have a good personality. If it’s just her mentality, it’s probably stronger than the JFA[6]…

We pondered over places we could eat at as we walked around.

“If you’re okay with anything, then… Saizeriya sounds good.”

Isshiki shook her head in rejection. *Come on, didn’t you just say you were fine with anything…?* In the end, I had to take into consideration some of Isshiki’s needs when I answer.

With that said, let’s start the “Quiz! Irohasu Lunch!” I had to keep naming one place after another until they were to Isshiki’s liking.

“Okay, how about Jolly Pasta?”

Isshiki turned her head in rejection. *This is wrong, too…*

“Tch, fine. I’ll compromise all the way up until Tora no Ana.”

Isshiki tilted her head going, “Pardon?” *Grrr, what other store can you eat pasta at…?*

“C-Capricciosa?”

Eventually, Isshiki sighed. Apparently, my time was up. The number of correct answers I gave to the “Quiz Irohasu Lunch!” was zero, so no points for me.

“Pasta and more pasta, huh…? I’m fine with just going where you want to go to, senpai.”

“For real? So you’re fine without pasta or avocado?”

“Seriously, just what do you take me for…?” Isshiki looked slightly indignant and glared at me.

No, girls were supposed to wholeheartedly like pasta and avocado… Oh, and shrimp. Shrimp, for sure. Girls had the image of liking shrimp. You know what I mean? Like, isn’t Cobb Salada Pasta, combination of pasta and avocado, just the greatest thing ever?

She said anywhere was fine, but a few moments ago, she rejected Saizeriya. I checked with her just in case and asked again, “You sure? You’re not testing me, are you?”

Isshiki groaned and looked into empty space. “Well, normally, I would be, but…”

So you’ve always been doing it, huh…? Irohasu, you’re scary.

“But for today, I’m fine with whatever place you usually eat at, senpai.”

…Thank goodness, the only other pasta store I knew was Tapas Tapas, though, there really isn't one around Chiba Station anyway.

So that means I should really take her along to my preferred stores.

But since they were places that lowly high school students like us wouldn't often go to, my options were naturally trimmed down. On weekends at this time, family restaurants and cafes were expected to be full. That being said, I wasn't in the know-how about stylish stores, either.

To borrow Isshiki's words today, she's expecting something junky from me.

In which case, there was just one answer.

"Alright, I guess we'll have to go *there*…" I said, and took a step forward towards the center of Chiba to lead the way for Isshiki.

A main street in Chiba that ran along large shopping malls such as SOGO, PARCO, and C-ONE was full of restaurants, but there were just as many on the street famously known as the "pick-up street" and the narrow back street that extended on the side.

But for a Chiba citizen of my stature, I would purposely take the back alley and inconspicuously choose an open store.

Normally, I'd embark on an adventure to discover new stores to eat at, but I had company today.

At a time like this, choosing somewhere prominent seems like the right thing to do.

When we entered the street, the signboard with orange lights of the store I was aiming for came into view. Below that signboard, there were stairs that descended underground.

Isshiki's eyes sparkled from the refuge-like atmosphere of the underground.

"You'll get a lot of points if you know about delicious places, you know!" Isshiki tugging at my sleeve, showing her excitement.

We then arrived at the ramen shop, Naritake, considerably well-known even in Chiba. Presently, they ran operations in Tokyo and in Nagoya. They also had businesses in Paris, France as well, so it's occasionally referred to as Paritake (by me).

"And… we're eating ramen?" Isshiki looked into the store through the glass and her excitement visibly disappeared. She was completely still, no longer tugging at my sleeve.

"You said any place I usually eat was fine, so…"

"Well, I guess it's senpai we're talking about here," she said in resignation and let out a deep sigh.

O-Okay… I mean, sure, it's not stylish or anything, but I don't think you have to be that disappointed about my choice…

Based on my experiences, girls were supposed to like ramen. Source: Hiratsuka-sensei. C*rap, my source of information wasn't credible at all. For one thing, she's not even at the age she could be called a girl anymore, so that's bad. What's bad? Calling her a girl is bad.*

Had Hiratsuka-sensei been here, she'd definitely jump right into the store to eat. Heck, she'd get all nari, nari, and take, take while doing so. To put it in another way, as far as I know, only Hiratsuka-sensei would end up that way.

But if I looked at this from a different angle, this was a perfect chance to introduce Naritake to Isshiki. There's an old saying, "Where there's a pinch, there's a crisis, but where there's a pinch, there's also a chance." A pinch normally was just a crisis, so the moment you thought it's your chance, you'd get the rug pulled from under you. I had better stay focused!

"Um, why don't you reserve your judgments for after giving it a try….?" I instinctively used a polite tone and timidly spoke to Isshiki.

Isshiki gave me a fixed stare, but then gave up and nodded. "I guess that's fine. I mean, I'm the one that said you should pick, anyway…"

Oh, really? Really? Well, if you're fine with it that way, that works for me…

I entered the store and was able to get Isshiki's approval although she was reluctant. We were welcomed with an energetic voice, "Hello, 'elcome!"

Most of the counter seats were occupied since it was the afternoon, but luckily for us, two seats were open. I decided to purchase a meal ticket from the nearby ticket machine. Isshiki looked at the words on the buttons and her gaze swam around in confusion. It looks she was at a loss.

"I suggest the shoyu flavor. Miso's pretty good too, but for your first time, it's usually best to go with shoyu."

"I'll go with that then."

Once Isshiki purchased her ticket, we headed to the counter. We took our seats and the first thing that came out of my mouth was a call to a waiter.

"Gita gita."

"Gita? Huh?" Sitting next to me, Isshiki gave me a dubious look.

"It refers to the amount of fat you want in your broth. Oh, can we get assari broth for her?"

Back fat and the rich flavors were the selling points of Naritake, but even if you ordered something with a normal amount of fat, the taste was still pretty strong compared to other ramen shops. It's recommended for beginners to start off with assari ramen.

"…You seemed used to this, senpai."

“Pretty much.” Taking that as a compliment for my status as a regular, I boasted proudly. But I didn’t get so much of a reaction from her afterwards.

When I glanced at her, Isshiki was retreating away from me with an apathetic look.

Hmm, Irohasu doesn’t seem too impressed with me… We’re sitting right next to each other, yet why do we feel so far from each other…?

Hey boys! Listen up! You guys can flaunt your knowledge of B-class food like ramen and curry all you want, but girls don’t find that impressive at all! Boys looking to get popular by doing that should keep that in mind!

I watched the kitchen in front of me since we weren’t talking during our wait and I realized something. “…The guy who says, ‘Hello, ‘elcome’ is here today. Looks like our ramen’s going to get something added to it.”

“Huh? What the heck are you saying?”

“The thing is, Naritake is normally pretty good, but depending on the time of the hour, the person making the ramen will put a twist to it and it’ll taste subtly different. And so, the time I like to go to Naritake the most is when the guy who greets you with ‘hello, ‘elcome’ is on his shift.”

“…Um, your spiel isn’t exactly the kind of explanation I was looking for.”

The moment she stated that wearily, the ramen arrived. The gita gita concentration of back fat glistened shinily like the peak of Mount Fuji, the rising steam warming the hearts of those who watched.

“Eh? What is this, is this fat, are you for real?” Isshiki raised a voice of shock after seeing the bowl, but I didn’t have the time to deal with her.

“Thank you for the food.” I solemnly gave my appreciation. I then grabbed the Chinese spoon and chopsticks and earnestly ate, slurped, feasted, and swallowed my ramen. It was indeed an addicting taste.

On the other hand, the nearby Isshiki was watching me dreamily eat away at my ramen in aversion, but after swallowing her breath as if readying herself, she timidly took her chopsticks. She gracefully carried her Chinese spoon up to her mouth, raised her jaw, and moved her slender neck.

She then froze. Although it was only for a moment, she quickly came back to her senses and picked up the noodles with her chopsticks, blowing at them with her glossy lips, and began chowing down.

Apparently, it didn’t leave a bad impression on her. Relieved from her reaction, I resumed my eating.

We both continued eating in silence and ended up finishing our food before we even realized it.

"…It's frustrating to say," said Isshiki, whispering. I watched her with a sidelong glance and she lifted her face and looked at me. She looked frustrated somehow. Isshiki pouted and continued her words.

"But it was good…" She immediately averted her face. I felt like breaking into a smile after seeing that.

"…I'm glad to hear that."

"Well, I suppose taking a girl into a store that's normally hard to enter alone by herself might score you some high points." Isshiki nodded her and convinced herself as if she was persuading someone. As long she enjoyed it, that made me extremely delighted.

But when I think about it, pasta and ramen were pretty similar and when it came to oil content, avocados and back fat weren't all that different.

Carbohydrates and fat didn't discriminate between men and women and may very well be the best things ever.

Naritake really was god-like.

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Alright, now that we're done eating, let's go home!

At least, that's what I wanted to say, but we were still walking around the town of Chiba.

"Don't you feel like eating something sweet?"

She posed it as a question, but in reality, she was issuing an order. I accepted her order and we went around looking for a place similar to a cafe.

"There's like a lot of nice stores if we go that way," Isshiki said, hastily walking on. The direction she headed in veered slightly away from the town center and led to a subdued street with a park, offices, and apartments.

We passed the front of the central station and walked down a street that had gone through maintenance relatively recently. This area, unlike the crowded "pick-up" street, was sparse with buildings.

It might've been the reason why the blowing wind felt a little stronger.

For how clear the weather was, the north wind was still chilly.

Having had my fill of ramen, I was feeling nice and warm—and I wouldn't say I wanted to go home at this instant—but I wasn't very fond of walking for long periods of time.

I looked at Isshiki wondering how much longer this was going to take and she pointed ahead with a smile. "You see that? It's that store over there."

When I looked, I was met with a stylish cafe.

Its exterior was made of wooden panels with large windows that took in light from outside, the terrace had a large, green parasol, and the front of the cafe had a

blackboard with the menu written in chalk and exposed in broad daylight how stylish it is. *Hey, you can't be serious, we're in Chiba, you know? Is it really okay to have this kind of cafe in Chiba?*

How about it? You're okay with that store, right? We *are* going in, right? You don't know what "I won't go" means, right? Isshiki pulled at my scarf silently as if asking those strings of questions. *Um, my scarf isn't a leash, you know?*

"Well, I guess this store works."

Then again, it was really cold, so anywhere was fine with me. I know for sure I wouldn't bother entering that store if I was alone, but since I was accompanied by Isshiki today, they should forgive me for trespassing into their stylish world.

"Okay, let's g—oh, shoot!" Isshiki said, and stopped.

"What? What's going on?"

She pulled my sleeve, forcing me to a stop. *My sleeves aren't your reins, either…* She then frantically went behind me. She then peeked out her face from the side and pointed at the store.

"Please take a look over there."

"Hm."

I looked in the direction as I was told and a couple had just come out of the cafe. A frail looking girl wearing glasses with pigtails and a regular boy with no worthwhile traits that could be found in any boy elsewhere… After those two left the store, they walked in the opposite direction of us.

I watched them in curiosity with my arms crossed and contemplated.

They look kind of familiar… As I thought about who they were, a voice spoke to me from behind.

"He's the vice president and she's the secretary."

…Ohhh, that's right, I've met them before.

No, wait just one second. Why did those two come out of that cafe together?

"What, don't tell me those two are dating?" I asked Isshiki who took some distance from my back.

She tilted her head. "Who knows? I don't think so? Just because they went out out together somewhere for a little bit doesn't mean they're da…"

Isshiki abruptly stopped and turned around with incredible intensity.

"Ha! What was that just now, were you trying to hit on me, you're a bit shameless to think you can act like a boyfriend just because we went out to have fun for a bit, I'm sorry, please do that only after we do this a few more times." She quickly ran her mouth after flinging out both her hands as if to take some distance.

"…Ahh, yeah, sure. Nevermind, just forget it."

It's too much of a pain to ask how she came to that conclusion… Also, counting how many times she's rejected me like that was starting to feel stupid…

"Whatever, let's just go in already. I'm cold."

"Oh, please wait for me!"

I went into the store after telling her and Isshiki chased after me.

I knew it was stylish outside, but the interior wasn't any different. They were seemingly picky about their chairs and tables as every single one of them was distinct. The walls and the drawers were decorated with sweet decorations, forming an interior that would be popular among female customers.

The seats we were led to were inside to the right and were sofas that looked standard compared to the interior of the store. Sunlight from outside poured in through the bow window that faced the street.

Isshiki who sat across from me promptly opened the menu. "Oh, yikes! I have, like, no idea what to get, you know?"

Though she asked, it didn't look like she was expecting an answer from me in particular as she flipped through the menu on her own. That's Irohasu for you, so sly; she was exhibiting her sweets-loving femine wiles. Well, slyness didn't really matter since a lot of girls liked sweet things, anyway. Case in point, there's a cookie-eating monster that gobbled down tea cakes at the club room… Although recently, she's been devouring rice crackers instead.

As I watched Isshiki worry over the menu, she turned a part of it towards me.

Ohh, the menu is pretty varied…

Macaron, swiss roll, gâteau au fromage cheesecake, crème brûlée… There's also gelato and sorbet. I wonder what the difference between those two is? Was it something like Shofukutei family[7] or something?

With worthless thoughts in mind, I compared the menu item names and pictures until Isshiki popped her face above the menu.

"I'm ready."

"Oh. Let's call someone over then."

After calling the waiter, Isshiki pointed at the menu and ordered. "I'll take assam tea and a macaron, please."

"And I'll take… a blend coffee and a gelato."

After making our orders, a time of relaxation continued for a while.

The softly played bossa nova BGM, the warm atmosphere inside, and the tender sunlight of the early afternoon. Every single one of them contributed to the special mood inside this cafe. Even the voices of other customers sounded distant and quiet as if though they were submerged in water.

But in place of those voices, my attention was directed at the person in front of me.

Isshiki must visit this shop regularly because she sank into the sofa and was extremely relaxed. She placed her elbow on the armrest, rested her cheeks in her hand, and looked outside the window. She hummed to herself in anticipation of her macaron.

I looked at the scenery outside as well while listening to her faint humming voice. In the scenery ahead was the typical landscape of the town of Chiba, but as I gazed at it from behind a single sheet of glass inside the stylish cafe interior, it appeared much more extravagant than normal. It could've been the magic of this cafe's atmosphere that caused me to see that illusion.

Perhaps, Isshiki was fond of this scenery and decided to frequent this store. That's not to say that she's the only customer that came here.

"Do you use this store for the student council?" I asked, remembering the two we saw from earlier. Isshiki turned towards me and shook her head.

Then, Isshiki clapped her hands, moved her hand to her chin, and thought.

"Ahh, you're talking about the VP and secretary. I think it might've been because we talked about it last week."

"You don't say…"

So that's why we came across them.

No, maybe the vice president decided to use that as a chance to invite the secretary. "Hey, do you recall that store Isshiki-san talked about the other day? Wanna try going there?" or something! *Pfft, disgusting. What the heck are they doing at the student council? Don't screw with me, do your jobs.*

…No, wait. It's not necessarily the vice president who did the inviting. If it's the frail secretary girl who mustered her courage to invite him, that made me want to root for her! Of course, I had no intention of cheering for the vice president, though! Because internally, I think I put the vice president in the same category as Tobe. And I mean that in the sense that he's a victim of Isshiki Iroha.

As I was thinking, the perp in question, Isshiki Iroha, spoke to me.

"I asked the vice president if there was any place I could go out to to have fun on the weekend. And that's just for today. Just for today!" Isshiki said, emphasizing that last part as she looked up at me. *You have to emphasize what's important, huh…? Being that blunt isn't very high in Hachiman points.*

"I appreciate the gesture, but I would've liked it if you just prepared the more basic things first…"

You know, like checking my opinion on the matter or giving me a clear explanation of what our objective is in going out to have fun. There's definitely plenty of things you should've done beforehand…

But letting my complaints in one ear and out the other, Isshiki candidly averted her gaze and changed the topic while mumbling. “Well, I wasn’t expecting to see them here, so that was kind of a close call…”

She stopped speaking there, moved her gaze back and looked directly at me. And then, she softly supported her mouth with her hand as if hesitant of her surroundings and with a smile, whispered secretly, “Next time, let’s go somewhere where we won’t see many people we know.”

“There’s a next time…?” I said. When I was surprised by her words and imagined how much trouble it’d be, my voice came out slightly hoarse.

Hearing that, Isshiki glared back. “Why do you look like you don’t like it?”

“Oh no, it’s not that I don’t like it or anything… Well, let’s just say, I’ll coordinate something in the direction that can consider any positive possibilities as much as I can.”

“Jeez, that doesn’t sound realistic at all…” Isshiki sighed and looked at me with a wry smile. Then, her mouth formed a circle and an excited glitter appeared in her eyes. I turned around to the direction where Isshiki was looking—namely, behind me—and a waiter was carrying over a cake set to us.

The macaron, tea, gelato and coffee were elegantly placed on the table. After looking at the items in joy, Isshiki took out her cellphone and began snapping pictures. For some reason, she even took pictures of my gelato as well.

Why do girls take pictures of their food anyway? Were they recording their diet or something? Or did their RIZAP trainers tell them to send the pictures to them?

Once Isshiki was satisfied with taking pictures, she lowered her cellphone. Just when I thought I could finally eat, Isshiki raised her hand.

“Ah, excuse me. Can you take the picture?”

When she called the waiter, the waiter quickly appeared and accepted her cellphone.*Taking pictures again? Just how much longer are you going to make me wait!? I want to eat my gelato already!* I took the spoon and my hand was hit.

Upon looking, Isshiki was leaning over and posing in front of the waiter with her cellphone in camera mode.

“Come on, senpai, make a peace sign. Peace.”

“I don’t wanna. You don’t really need a picture of me. The gelato’s going to melt, you know.”

“It won’t melt that fast. So, come on,” Isshiki said quickly, not turning. Apparently, she couldn’t hold her posing face for very long. As if getting impatient, the waiter’s politeness turned a bit crude.

"Um, sir…?" The waiter said, looking at me with a troubled smile. The waiter's gaze had a feeling of oppression than confusion of wondering what to do… *I-I'm sorry for getting in the way of your work…*

"Senpai, come on, come on." Isshiki hurried me. Since I didn't have much of a choice, I slightly moved the plates and leaned over the table.

"You should get just a little closer…" The waiter instructed me while posing with the camera and I adjusted my body a little more. And then, I was suddenly met with the smell of shampoo. I looked with just my eyes and Isshiki's soft hair fluttered. Her face was surprisingly close. The moment I instinctively moved my body away, the waiter called out.

"Ah, there, that should be good. Okay, here we go."

And then, there were two to three snapping sounds.

"Thank you very much."

After giving her thanks, Isshiki took back her cellphone and looked at the pictures while sinking deeply into the sofa. I didn't think it'd be so tiring to take pictures… The thing about how your soul getting sucked out when taking pictures might actually be true.

I let out a sigh and the ascending steam from the coffee disappeared. I wanted to drink it before it got any colder.

"…Can I eat now?"

"Ah, yes, please go ahead." Isshiki replied nonchalantly while checking over the pictures on her cellphone. Hoping that my face wasn't red in the picture, I ate my gelato I was forced to wait on to cool down my face and head.

…Damn it, it really did melt a little.

× × ×

I left the store after we paid the bill and it was already getting dark. While we were lethargically chatting over pointless things and enjoying our sweets, we were apparently sitting inside for too long.

Now that it was night time, the wind got slightly stronger and chills seeped through the small openings of my loosened scarf.

As I adjusted the collars of my coat and wrapping myself with the scarf again, Isshiki came out the store a little later.

"Sorry for the wait. I almost forgot to get the receipt."

Isshiki bonked her head with a "teehee, oops" ☆. *How sly…* Then again, I wonder what she's going to use the receipt for? We paid the bill together earlier, too. Speaking of which, after playing table tennis and eating ramen, she also kept those receipts… Was she going to file an income report or something?

"Alright, I guess we should head to the station."

“Okay.” Isshiki nodded and we both began walking.

There were people heading to the station and people who were likely coming from the station at this very moment. With the mingling of human traffic, the townscape was showing its after-hours face. Given that it’s a weekend, the town was even more showy and lively.

It wasn’t that late yet, but I yawned which could’ve been because of the table tennis match we had. It spread to Isshiki who had been walking beside me on the sidewalk and she yawned as well.

When Isshiki noticed I was watching her yawn, she looked a little embarrassed. She coughed to play it off and took half a step closer.

“Well, I suppose you get about ten points for today,” Isshiki said, abruptly.

It sounded like she’s giving me the points I earned from her test exam for date courses.

“I guess I’ll ask, but out of how many points?”

“One hundred, of course.”

“Why the heck is it so low…?”

I thought I tried pretty hard, you know? Yeah? Aren’t you being just a little unfair? I gave Isshiki a discontent look and she raised both of her hands that were covered with mittens.

They formed the shape of paper and she began counting with her fingers. “First, you lose ten points for not being Hayama-senpai.”

“An unreasonable guideline right off the bat, huh?”

Are you Nayotake no Kaguya-Hime[8] or something? Not to mention you’re doing a system of subtracting points. When you’re raising people, I personally think it’s better to use a system of adding points. Let’s develop our good points, yeah!

But the screams of my soul weren’t able to reach Isshiki as she counted while folding finger after finger of her left hand. *Please stop, the more you fold your fingers, the more you’re folding my heart.*

“And if we include your behavior and conduct, that’s a total of minus forty points, okay?”

“I guess that’s fair.” I nodded back naturally. If anything, the fact that I lost only that much points meant I did well. Though it might’ve been more due to Isshiki’s lenience than my hard work.

“So you *were* aware of it…”

Her sighing voice was mixed with resignation. *Oh, you’re not going to give me a free pass, after all…*

Now then, Isshiki-sensei's scoring continued. Isshiki abruptly squeezed her right hand into a fist and lightly punched me in the side. "You lose fifty points for accepting a girl's invitation so easily."

"You're the one that called me… Wait, now my points are at zero."

I didn't feel an ounce of pain in my side from her punches, but strangely enough, something pricked at my chest. A person I recalled in that casual instant oddly weighed on my mind.

After poking my side, Isshiki went a step ahead, stuck up a finger, and coughed with her chest out. "Well, I had fun, so I'll give you ten points as a bonus."

"…Gee, thanks for that."

In total, ten points. The evaluation was occasionally harsh, but the final allotted points were a little more forgiving. The breakdown of my own scoring was similar, so I was more or less convinced with it.

As we chatted, we gradually approached the station.

From here, I'd take the Sobu Line and Isshiki would likely take the monorail home. So that means we'd be parting ways at the front of the station.

"So how was it for you, senpai?" Isshiki asked modestly when we arrived at the rotary that continued to a short flight of stairs. Since she was facing down, I couldn't see her expression, so I didn't understand her question for a moment.

However, it shouldn't have strayed all that far from what I had been thinking from earlier.

"Well, I guess it's like that for me… I'm a little tired, though."

"Do you have to be that honest about how tired you are…? I mean, it's fine and all. It just means you were actually being a proper partner for me!"

Isshiki's raised face had an energetic smile. I ended up making a stiff face to her typical slyness. When Isshiki saw my wry smile, Isshiki puffed her cheeks in displeasure.

"What's with that super pain-in-the-butt face of yours…?" Isshiki's cheeks swelled and she briskly walked ahead turning away. She stated in a passing and sulking voice, "There's no girl that's not a pain in the butt, you know."

Ahh, that was surprisingly believable. I lightly shrugged my shoulders and increased my pace after Isshiki.

"…I can imagine. There aren't very many people who aren't a lot of trouble."

"Wow, you're such a pain, senpai." Isshiki turned around, making an annoyed face that was far beyond what I had earlier. *This girl's cruel.*

Our walking pace must've dropped due to the both of us thinking how much trouble we were. But the concourse in front of the station was just right in front of

us. After avoiding the flow of people from the ticket gates, we arrived at today's meeting spot, the front of Vision. Isshiki stopped and I did so as well.

"In any case, today turned out to be a good learning experience. Thank you very much."

Isshiki lightly bowed, honestly expressing her appreciation. Taken aback by her earnest and mannerly behavior, I replied back awkwardly in a fluster. Isshiki lifted her face and laughed in amusement.

"…Senpai, make sure to keep today in mind, okay?"

She had a kind gaze, tinged slightly with strictness.

"…Yeah. Well, you know, thanks for today."

It certainly did feel like I learned a few things today. Of course, this was up Isshiki's alley, so I don't think she'd get much out of it. After all, everyone had a different specialty from someone else.

"Okay, I'll see you again at school."

"Be careful on your way back."

After exchanging our goodbyes, Isshiki headed to the platform of the monorail. As she ascended the escalator, she grew farther and farther.

Suddenly, Isshiki turned around and waved her hand. I lifted my hand back in response and watched her from afar.

Girls are made of sugar and spice, and all things nice.

The "nice thing" that Isshiki Iroha had. It was sweet, yet spicy. And it was probably bitter and sour. Her "nice thing" was so bothersome that you wouldn't be able to understand unless you experienced it for yourself.

And without a doubt, Isshiki wasn't the only one who had something of that nature as the two girls whom I was fairly close with in my own way had it as well.

Just what could it be, I wonder?

As I watched Isshiki until she vanished, for just a little, something like that crossed my mind.

Zzz!

Chapter 3

There's a **deadline** that must absolutely not be missed.

The clubroom later in the day was far more frigid than usual.

We informed Hiratsuka-sensei about how the clubroom heater had started spewing out abnormal noises since a few days ago. After that, we were notified not to use it until the manufacturer made their repairs.

Our school life was as normal as could be—the clubroom wasn't utilized during the day—but it was a slightly different story after school.

With the gradually declining sun and the dropping temperatures, we still chose to participate in club.

That's why even in the clubroom, my scarf was still wrapped around my neck. The only reliable source of warmth worth mentioning was at best the electric kettle.

However, the kettle wasn't meant to keep us warm. After all, it was being used to brew our tea for today. That said, its miniscule contribution of warmth was far better than having none at all in this frozen wasteland of a room.

Humans were creatures that couldn't cope with the emptiness that followed the loss of their extravagant life they had gotten so used to. For every chilling sensation that crept up my feet, my hand would stop turning the page of my book on a casual whim.

At any rate, our club wasn't one to see frequent visitors. It'd be far more enjoyable spending my time reading at home than here. Heck, as shameful as it is for me to say this, reading in a Starbucks surrounded by overly aware (lol) people would be more preferable than this. On another note, why did overly aware (lol) people always sit near the window and attempt to show off by playing around with their MacBook or pretend to read a new book they bought, anyway? Were they trying to be the bugs that would stick themselves to windows on a late summer night?

Of course, reading peacefully at a popular location such as Starbucks wasn't that simple. If we take into consideration how crowded it'd be, the clubroom was the superior place to be. And I certainly didn't dislike the tranquil and cool atmosphere that was in it. But come winter, the coolness would intensify.

My seat, in particular, was positioned near the wall that separated the room from the hallway. Only, this wall was as thin as Something-Place 21[1]. Calling it a panel would be more accurate. It was so thin that it didn't prove to be much in obstructing the outside air and the cold wind would seep through the crevices of the doors.

"…Hey, can we end club early today? It's really cold."

My shoulders would shake every time I became aware of how cold it was. Unable to endure the chilliness, I spoke to the two that sat near the windows.

Reading just as I was, Yukinoshita tilted her head in wonder. "Really…? Well, what should we do?"

"Ehhh, why? I'm not even cold."

Yukinoshita moved her hand to her chin and contemplated. Answering her question was Yuigahama.

Well duh, of course Yuigahama wouldn't feel cold.

After all, she was the one who immediately relocated her seat right next to Yukinoshita after realizing how cold it was in here. She then invaded Yukinoshita's lap blanket. Yukinoshita would normally shoo her away with complaints about how sultry and bothersome she was being, but today, she was letting Yuigahama do as she pleased.

As such, they both had very cozy expressions.

While they were sitting in a spot where the sun could reach them, the biggest reason was the mutual exchanging of their body warmth. *Looking rather warm, you two…*

I gave those intimate two a reproachful stare. Yuigahama who was clinging right onto Yukinoshita slightly straightened up.

"H-Hey Hikki, aren't you cold over there?"

"…Yeah, it's cold."

When she reconfirmed the fact with a question, I felt another chill crawl up my body and I found myself rubbing my upper arms.

"Oh…" Yuigahama turned over the blanket once as though to confirm its size. After, she hesitated for a moment and let out a small breath.

When she sent me an examining look with upturned eyes, I grew restless.

She breathed in and out in hopes of trying to say something and her plentiful bosom would expand and contract. Then, looking ready, she opened her mouth, her voice so small and audible that didn't align with her behavior moments before.

"Th-Then, how about you…"

Yuigahama mumbled her words in difficulty and Yukinoshita finished her sentence with a soft smile.

"Wear your coat?"

I saw that coming, yes. I grabbed my coat as was suggested and placed it around my shoulders, not wearing it through my arms like how an office lady sensitive to the cold would agonize from air conditioning during the summer.

I wonder if club can end any sooner… As I was staring at the clock on the wall, there were knocking sounds at the door. *Ah, damn it, someone actually came… I guess I won't be heading home any time soon.*

"Come in," Yukinoshita answered the door, ignoring me as I hung my head in depression. After waiting for her voice, the door then flung open.

"Good work everyone!"

Entering the room with a bow, the person's flaxen hair swayed. Visible between the gaps of her bangs were her large pupils, and she wore a faint smile at her mouth.

Today, like every other day, Isshiki Iroha had come to our club. This time, however, she greeted us more politely, giving rise to a sense of discomfort. *I don't like where this is going…*

"Ohh, Iroha-chan. Yahallo!" Yuigahama raised her hand and called her name. Isshiki waved back and the baggy sleeves of her cardigan would flap around.

"Hellooo there, good evening to you, too… Um, isn't this room kinda cold?" Isshiki returned her greeting, came into the room, and stopped. She then gave Yukinoshita a puzzled look.

Yukinoshita smiled, looking slightly problematic. "Yes, the heater isn't functioning as it should at the moment."

"Huh, is that so?" Isshiki said, not sounding particularly interested. She grabbed a chair and headed directly for the spot beside Yukinoshita. Then, she took a seat, pulled on the blanket at Yukinoshita's lap, and became one with the pseudo-human kotatsu.

"W-Wait…"

Having Isshiki suddenly cling on to her, Yukinoshita grumbled with a bewildered and threatening tone, but Isshiki didn't pay her much attention. As she mumbled to herself, "Sooo warm!!♪" she shrank the distance between Yukinoshita and her by wriggling closer to her.

"Oh, wanna get a little closer?"

"Is that okay? Thank you sooo much!"

Yuigahama offered kindly and Isshiki thanked her with a fawning voice. From there on, Yukinoshita was sandwiched together from both sides.

Stop it! Don't squish Yukinon anymore! She already has to deal with the blowing wind that runs across the open fields of Kanto, namely, her chest! If you're going to keep pressing her together like that, at least do it in an upwards-like manner!

Obviously, I couldn't say that out loud. But while I was stuck in a rut between whether I should stop the Isshiki and Yuigahama sandwich, the two of them continued their game of push with their backs against Yukinoshita.

"…Jeez." Yukinoshita sighed and let them have their way. She scooted her seat back slightly, giving enough room for Isshiki to share the blanket. She let out a happy "yaaay" as she jerked her seat closer and closer to Yukinoshita until she was snugly stuck to her.

Although Yukinoshita gave her an irked look, her hand did otherwise. She held the teapot wrapped in a quilt cloth and began pouring some tea in a paper cup.

"…Tea?"

"Th-Thank you very much."

After taking the steaming cup with both hands for warmth, Isshiki began drinking.*Mmm, you three look awfully warm…*

But you know, Yukinoshita-san, you do realize that you've been pampering not only Yuigahama, but Isshiki nowadays, right…?

Thinking back, for Yukinoshita, Yuigahama was her very first kind of friend while Isshiki was her very first kind of underclassman. Seeing her act somewhat like an upperclassman was a pleasant sight to behold.

I proceeded to gaze at the warm three girls from my isolated, freezing spot. After drinking her tea and looking comfortable, Isshiki sent me a short greeting.

"Oh, senpai, thank you for your time the other day."

"Mm, yeah," I answered.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at me, curious about our exchange. *Uh, this might be hard to explain…*

All we did was hang out, just the two of us. That's all that really happened, but imagine saying, "We really only went out to have fun, nothing else happened." If I had to explain myself to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama with an absurd excuse like that, it felt like I was acting too self-conscious.

But I felt just as guilty for keeping quiet. No, feeling guilty in the first place was what you'd call being overly self-conscious. Gosh, Hachiman-kun, you're so creepy…

Ultimately, all I could do was sit there quietly, meaninglessly breathing out that sounded like long sighs and groans. As if finding my behavior suspicious, Yukinoshita frowned while Yuigahama made alternating glances between Isshiki and me. *Oh dear…*

For the next, few short moments, the room was controlled by a bizarre silence. Even though the room was freezing, I could feel the sweat glands on my scalp opening.

As if to destroy that silence, Isshiki coughed. "So like, I've been thinking, but I want to try making a free newspaper for the Student Council."

"Pardon? A free newspaper?"

Yukinoshita gave a dubious look to Isshiki because her sudden talk was completely unrelated to earlier. *But hey, nice job, Irohasu! Now I was free from both of their stares…*

"A free newspaper was, um, that thing, right?"

"Yes, that thing."

Yuigahama and Isshiki used demonstrative pronouns only in their exchange. A few days ago when Zaimokuza came to our clubroom, I recall touching on the subject of a free newspaper during our discussion. That was enough for me to tell what they were referring to in their crude conversation.

The reason why, however, didn't get across to me.

"But why a free newspaper?" Yukinoshita asked, tilting her head.

Isshiki withdrew her hand that was under the blanket and proceeded to explain while wagging her finger.

"We have our Student Council's fiscal year-end coming up soon. So, when the vice president and the others gathered all the data, it turns out we still have a lot of money left in our budget this year."

"You don't say…"

The last Student Council President was Meguri-senpai. As the Comfy Megu ☆ rin, she didn't really have a strong associated image of someone avaricious about money. For there to be a remaining budget was somehow believable.

But the current Student Council President was Isshiki Iroha. As the Shrewd Iro ☆hasu, she was probably concerned about the money…

And as I had expected, she clapped her hands in front of her chest and smiled. "We might as well use up all the money since we have some left, right? I checked how much we have left, and it looks there's enough to make a free newspaper."

"That doesn't mean you should try to increase your work…"

Incomprehensible. Regardless of how much leftover money there is, actually trying to do more work is incomprehensible… This girl's definitely up to something… I gave her an interrogating stare to which Isshiki brushed it off with an "aha!" and a smile. *E-Even more suspicious…*

"But look, Iroha-chan. If you have leftover money, shouldn't you save it up? Savings are important, you know?" Yuigahama stated as if reprimanding her. *That's something a mom would say…*

She certainly did have a point; that is, if we assume the money was Isshiki's. But that's the problem. The money wasn't Isshiki's pocket money, but the budget money for the Student Council.

Having listened to the conversation thus far, Yukinoshita came to a realization regarding that point. She placed her hand to her chin and slowly spoke.

“I imagine it may not be that simple.”

“Why?” Yuigahama asked, tilting her head as though to rest it on Yukinoshita’s shoulder.

“If there’s still remaining money in the budget from a previous year, it’s possible the budget allocated for the following year may be reduced. If I was the one handling the budget, I would without a doubt reduce it.”

“Yes! Exactly! That’s why, to avoid getting my budget reduced for next year, it’d be better to just use up all the money before the year’s over, right?”

After Yukinoshita’s explanation, Isshiki wriggled her body closer to Yukinoshita. And to further gain her approval, Isshiki snuggled up against her like a child.

“Too close…”

I could hear her let out a shallow and perplexed voice. Caught in the middle from both sides, Yukinoshita was squeezed into a posture as though she was in a loaded train. *Yep yep, it’s good that you’re all getting along together.*

That said, Isshiki’s concern wasn’t completely unrelatable. It wasn’t Isshiki’s money though, of course. Like seriously, “my budget…?” It’s the Student Council’s money, not yours. But if she’s looking to stay within budget, publishing a free newspaper shouldn’t present much of a problem.

“Go for it. Don’t really know what you’re planning to publish, though,” I said, casually.

Isshiki detached herself from Yukinoshita and turned towards me. “Actually, about that, I’ve already kinda decided on what to do, see. I was thinking of doing something like introducing spots you could have fun at, places you could eat good food at, or even cute cafes.”

“Oh, that sounds great! How about clothes or assorted items, too!? People might like those!”

“That would make it something similar to a fanzine or a local magazine. The content certainly does seem like things people would like to see as well…”

Yuigahama became enthusiastic thanks to Isshiki’s idea and moved closer. Because of that, Yukinoshita was pressed in between even further.

Hmm, still, places you could have fun at, places you could eat good food at, and cute cafes, huh…? I felt like I heard that somewhere before. I think it was from “Being Human is Nice?”[2] A great place to go and hot rice, they must be waiting for the cute cafes? The only thing that was correct was the rice part. Okay, so it’s something else then.

“So a local magazine would mean… something like the ‘Chiba Walker’?” Yuigahama asked, leaning her body towards Isshiki.

Isshiki nodded with a “yep, yep” and pitched forward. Finally freed from their pressure, Yukinoshita breathed out with relief.

Isshiki’s explanation continued further.

“Like, if it’s an informational magazine, I can pretty much go wherever I want and just spend and spend and spend and put them under as expenses, right?”

Isshiki wore a *ka-ching!* ☆ smile while also uttering the worst things ever. *What do you mean “spend and spend and spend…?” You’re not trying making comments to try to instigate people to spend their social game money here…*[3]

Yukinoshita and I were appalled. On the other hand, Yuigahama tilted her head in thought.

“Expenses…”

I really hope you know what that means… Ignoring Yuigahama, when Isshiki saw my reaction, she puffed her cheeks.

“Weren’t you the one that told me to do that, senpai? That the money’s just going to end up as expenses, so I might as well just use it however I’d like?” Isshiki said.

Yukinoshita then gave me a cold glance. “You’re not teaching her anything proper, are you…?”

“Hold it, I did not say that.”

In trying to defend my honor, Isshiki shook her head and glumly looked at me. “Yes, you did. When we were preparing for the Christmas event, you definitely said that.”

Did I really…? That event was a collaboration with the other school anyway, so we should just use the money as much as we want without being concerned about their expenses… Okay, I did say that. A perceptive Irohasu was scary. Actually, it’s pretty obvious she took it the wrong way…

“Isshiki-san, your actions can also be deemed as misappropriation of funds…”

“But everyone will get to know about lots of stuff and I’ll get to have fun. Isn’t this, like, WIN-WIN for everyone?”

Yukinoshita chided her, but Isshiki retorted back as if she was unrelated. *Oh my! Tamanawa-kun’s being a bad influence on this child… Dad won’t allow you to be with a person like that, you hear!?*

“When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound all that bad…” Yuigahama said, groaning. In reality, if something you did was enjoyable to you and that directly linked with everyone’s happiness as a whole, you couldn’t call that dishonest behavior unconditionally. It might actually be ideal to cater to your interest while reaping the practical benefits.

So Isshiki wasn't just blabbering about absurd things. I could understand that much. Now we had to consider how realistic her suggestion was.

Yukinoshita crossed her arms and thought. She then slowly spoke.

"However, will they actually approve those expenses?"

"Oh Yukinoshita-senpai, what are you talking about? The one in charge of approving that is the secretary, you know?" Isshiki answered, making a comical laugh. *Never mind, she really is proposing something absurd…* Well, either way, in the event something happens, Isshiki was the one taking responsibility. If the secretary's job was to approve adjustments to the budget, then it was Isshiki's job to embowel herself at the very end! That's her responsibility as the person in charge, after all!

As to whether Isshiki was actually aware of that or not, I was a doubtful, but it looks like she was motivated enough in turn.

"So, back to the newspaper… How do you think I should make it?" Isshiki asked, restarting the conversation and jumping into the main topic. *Mmhmm, it's good to know that you're raring to go…*

"You're not going to get much out of us…. It's not like we've made one before…"

"That's true… Rather, we don't know the process in doing so."

Yukinoshita expressed her agreement. Listening on the side, Yuigahama looked as though she recalled something and clapped her hands.

"Hey, didn't we make a page for that one local magazine from before?"

"Oh yeah, we did do something like that, didn't we…?"

From what I could remember, it was a matter that Hiratsuka-sensei brought to us. A local magazine was going to be published for the livelihood of the region and its target demographic was the younger generation. We were tasked with producing a single page on the subject of marriage. We went through quite a lot to get it done.

We talked while I recalled those memories one by one. Then, Isshiki abruptly pitched forward. "Oh, that's good! Now it looks like we're getting somewhere!"

"We were only required to do one page back then. If we have to start from scratch, the circumstances change. It's impossible," Yukinoshita said, rebuking Isshiki.

Isshiki adjusted her sitting posture in dejection and dropped her shoulders. She then looked at Yukinoshita with upturned eyes.

"…Really?"

"Yes." Yukinoshita coldly asserted. However, with Isshiki groaning, giving her a somewhat reproachful, but spoiled look, even Yukinoshita was a loss for

words and averted her face. *Oh no, not good! At this rate, Isshiki's going to have her way with Yukinoshita!*

In the face of well-established logic and words, Yukinoshita was quick to turn people down. But whenever she was pressured by sentimental words and gestures, she'd cave in surprisingly easy. Source: Yuigahama's usual exchanges with her.

Under Isshiki's scrutiny with helpless eyes, Yukinoshita squirmed in discomfort. Yuigahama then intervened.

"Okay, okay, so about making that free newspaper, why don't you go look up how to make it first? Try asking some people with the know-how and get their help… After that, we can make it together with you!"

"You're so kind, Yui-senpai!" Isshiki made an elated smile when Yuigahama addressed her warmly. But after careful examination of her words, Yuigahama was certainly kind, but she was actually saying to "come back another time."

I'd expect nothing less from Yuigahama. As the leading expert on how to suck up to Yukinoshita, Isshiki's offensive appeal didn't prove to be very effective against her.

"Yeah, Yuigahama's right. If you really have to do it, then it's best if you took some time to prepare for what you'll need."

The three of us expressed our disapproval. Isshiki made a troubled look, her eyebrows frowning.

"It's not that simple, see."

"Why?" I asked.

Isshiki casted her eyes downwards. With a solemn voice, she whispered, "It's because the fiscal year-end is coming up soon."

It felt like she had mentioned something really significant just now.

That's true, it's just near the fiscal year-end. My parents were probably going to be far busier than normal.

Apparently, during this period, corporate slaves had a lot of obligations to take care of.

That is, according to the public internet rumored to have all the truths. Supposedly, one reason why there's a focus on merchandise such as BD Boxes and OVAs in February and March was because they were closing in on the fiscal year-end.

Of course, this didn't apply to all things related to anime. This period was when companies would try to make financial ends meet for their business projects by mass producing merchandise to increase sales. Source: Mama and Papa. Today like every other, the both of them were busy working…

“Like, I’m not too sure of all the details. If we want to squeeze in the expenses by the end of the fiscal year, we have to do it before the accounting period at the beginning of March. We’ve already passed the beginning of February, so we only have what’s left of this month!” Isshiki said, impatiently. She wagged her finger while trying her best to explain the situation. As adorable as she was for doing that, hearing her say things like “fiscal year,” “expenses,” and “squeeze” wasn’t cute in the least…

Anyway, I understood that she didn’t have much time left. For the rest of this month, she should focus on compiling all the invoices and receipts in order to make the accounting period for next month.

So that means that it’d be bad if she didn’t get her work done by the end of this month…

While we might’ve just entered February, it’s already a short enough month as it is. On top of that, even if she’s looking to make just a free newspaper, building it up from scratch was a Herculean task.

“It’s absolutely impossible, give up,” I said. Yukinoshita silently nodded while Yuigahama made a helpless and bittersweet smile.

Tearing up, slouching over, and looking up at me won’t do you any good. What’s impossible is impossible. I slowly shook my head. Then, Isshiki quietly stood up.

“Senpai… I’d like some advice…” Isshiki stood up, quietly walking towards me. She stopped in front of me and looked down at me while I was sitting. She was right in front of me, yet she was hesitantly looking away.

“For…?” I asked.

Isshiki, however, didn’t say anything. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama gave us a puzzled look.

In complete disregard to the three of us who were perplexed, Isshiki began unbuttoning her blazer one by one. *Whoa, what the heck is this girl doing?*

I was in shock, but so were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. *No seriously, what the heck is she doing? Oh, gosh, wait, wait, are you undressing!? Help!*

Isshiki wriggled her body to take off her blazer and groaned as if holding something in. Next, she shoved her hand inside her pink cardigan and began rummaging at the chest area of her blouse.

“Umm…” Isshiki let out a dull voice as she continued fiddling with her blouse. While she was doing that, her front collars would openly flap around, showing glimpses of her collarbones. I redirected my gaze since I was concerned with seeing that directly, but it only made the rustling noises of her clothes and her breathing all the more real.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to pull, but seriously, do that over there.” I looked down and shooed her away with the wave of my hand, trying to make some distance.

Isshiki then gasped loudly. “Oh, here it is.”

The hand she withdrew from inside her clothes was gripping several scraps of paper. Using her other hand, she slowly took my hand and closed it with those scraps inside.

The sudden contact of Isshiki’s hand. Her thin and supple fingers and the sensation of a girl’s skin that was so mysteriously soft caused me to grow stiff in place. Isshiki immediately let go and what remained within my hands were the warm pieces of scrap paper.

When it hit me that this miniscule warmth was from her, my hands were on the verge of sweating. I timidly opened up my fist.

There were several pieces of paper. As I sifted through them, I was met with familiar, printed words. The word “receipt” was lettered at the top and listed below were the names of the bowling alley and the cafe. There was even the meal ticket from the ramen shop.

Don’t tell me, these receipts are…

The thought suddenly ran through my mind. When I lifted my face, Isshiki was smiling and met my eyes.

Did you see it? You saw it, right? Then, you know where I’m going with this, right? Having her smile fire all those questions at me made having a spoken explanation unnecessary.

Isshiki jerked her hand at me, asking for the receipts back. I gave them back and she respectfully accepted them, quietly putting the receipts back in the breast pocket of her blouse.

“So, senpai, about my advice…” Isshiki said the same thing from earlier, only this time with a cutesy and coaxing voice.

For the most part, I understood what it is that Isshiki wanted to say. She’s essentially telling me that I was an accomplice.

But I should’ve been innocent. I mean, I paid for my own bills and it’s not like I was in her debt or anything. Yet, why was I feeling so guilty…? I had some fun and if anything, she was the one who should’ve been in debt for my expenses, you know? No, but still… Buuuuut…

It must’ve been because Isshiki was so confident when she presented the receipts to me that I was starting to feel like I had done something wrong. Now I know what it feels like to be an unrelated bystander in an incident and later forced into attesting…

I coughed once and turned to Isshiki. *Alright, this is where I show off my bargaining skills!*

"…A-Anyway, why don't we hear you out first?"

"It's like she threatened him, didn't she!?"

"Jeez…"

Yuigahama's shocking voice and Yukinoshita's sigh of disbelief compounded.

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To hold a more in-depth discussion, Isshiki went back to the Student Council to bring back some material. Some time had passed since she left. While we waited for her return, Yukinoshita gave us another filling of black tea.

When the steam ascended from the tea, the aroma filled the room. The heater wasn't functioning as usual, but the combination of the tea and my coat was enough to take my mind off the coldness of the room.

"Sorry for the wait!"

The door flung open and Isshiki excitedly came into the room.

She came in carrying a clear file. She placed that on the table and began removing its content onto the desk. Her eyes sparkled as though she was a child looking at a leaflet of a toy shop right before Christmas.

Having been witnessed to her acting like that, even I was starting to want to make this free newspaper a reality. However, spiritual concepts like energy, guts, and motivation alone weren't enough for that.

First, we needed to get a handle on the situation. The more you understood your situation, the more cornered you'd be; that's what they called work.

If the costs and the schedule weren't flexible enough, you couldn't make something happen in the first place. Being aware of that and still trying to press the issue would only lead to a drop in morale. On the other hand, in the case where the costs and the schedule were flexible, people would get complacent and claim it'd be a cinch. They would drop their guard and ultimately, everything would fall to ruin. *Ew, what's up with that? Having the job in the first place led only to a future where everything failed…*

But that's exactly why it's important to refuse the job once you had an idea of your capacity. In the situation where you didn't have the option of refusing, you should negotiate to reduce your workload. It's only after spending my time in this environment of forced labor called the Service Club that I was finally able to go through this epiphany. Finally.

I waited for Isshiki to finish preparing the documents and I spoke to her.

"First thing's first, we haven't decided we're going to do this yet. We'll decide only after we hear the specifics and discuss whether it's doable or not."

"Yes. That's fine with me!" She answered with a cheery voice and a bright smile.

Argh… You're making it harder for me to refuse if you look at me with those sparkling and expecting eyes…

I was speechless and sat there groaning. As if being my proxy, Yukinoshita started the conversation to advance it along.

"Well, why don't we start off with how you'd like to approach this."

“Yes. So, ummm, when we made printouts for the Christmas event last time, we made the orders from a printing company. I contacted them and asked them some questions, see?”

As Isshiki was speaking, she quickly took out several documents. They were pamphlets and sales quotes. But I have to say, to think she had already established communication with a printing company… She didn’t look like she could do any planning, but she certainly did have the ability to take action…

“So this is what they recommended to me…” Isshiki pointed at a spot in the pamphlet. Yukinoshita who had been beside her looked at where she indicated.

“Eight pages of full color… The scale’s gotten quite big now…” Yukinoshita pressed against her temple as if to restrain a headache. Isshiki let out an embarrassed laugh next to her.

“Well, I kinda ended up deciding on this because of where the conversation was heading.”

“Heading where exactly…?”

I was astounded. Isshiki’s cheeks inflated. “…I mean, you end up saying ‘yes’ when an adult tells you something, right?”

“I get you. I totally get you.” Yuigahama nodded, boldly expressing her agreement.*Mmhm, girls nowadays… I can’t help but be worried that a bad adult or upperclassman will deceive them one day…*

“Let’s see… Based on the budget, we can determine how many copies we can print… We should be able to secure places if it’s within the school and we can make them recyclable… It doesn’t seem like we’ll need to worry about any inventory risks, either.”

On the other hand, Yukinoshita paid no attention to the other two and mumbled to herself, processing the material at her own pace. *Mmhmm, Discommunication-chan… I’m a little worried about you, too!*

After a thorough examination of the pamphlet, Yukinoshita lifted her face and slid it over to me. I took the pamphlet and sifted through it. The pamphlet had a simple set of instructions all the way to printing.

“We can have the company handle the design and framing the content for us… This means as long as we can prepare a draft of the content and instructions on the design, we should be in good hands.”

“You don’t say. That doesn’t sound any different from the local magazine page we did before.”

So in short, as long we knew what we wanted printed in the newspaper, we wouldn’t have any problems. That being said, it didn’t change the fact that we needed to FIX the images and the composition in the articles. Phew, it’s abnormal how overly aware I felt for just saying FIX.

“The page count compared to back then is considerably different, however…” Yukinoshita answered. Her voice sounded somewhat tragic. That’s where Yuigahama opened her mouth with an energetic voice.

“But hey, we have the people from the Student Council this time. If we just split up the work with everyone, we should be able to manage something, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true. That should somewhat…” Just as I was about to continue, I could see Isshiki looking away with a sour face.

“……”

“…Isshiki-san? Just why are you so quiet?” Yukinoshita smiled sweetly, her voice amiable and her gaze warm. But mysteriously enough, there wasn’t a hint of warmth in her smile and just looking at her caused a chill to run up my spine. *I’m telling you already, that’s really scary…*

Isshiki was just as frightened—no, she was panicking to the point that she was making a commotion.

“Ah! N-No! Um… I-It’s just everyone’s kinda busy with the fiscal year-end. So I thought maybe there wouldn’t be any problems after we got that covered, or something…”

“…In other words, you’re saying we shouldn’t expect their assistance.”

“Yes…” Isshiki lowered her shoulders in apology when Yukinoshita let out a thin sigh.

“N-Now now, there’s not much we can do about that. If we really do need the help, I can try asking my friends or something… So, um… let’s just take it easy!” Yuigahama gripped her fist and said in encouragement. But this girl’s definition of “taking it easy” was probably different from doing things appropriately or properly…

In any case, we could see the costs of work and the workload. Presumably, we also had an idea on how the lowest number of staff we’d have. The only thing remaining was the schedule. Once we knew that, we could judge the possibility of this task.

We had a rough idea of the plans for the entire month, but we needed a much more in-depth look into the schedule.

“So, when exactly does this need to be done?”

“Very soon.” Isshiki took out a schedule sheet and tapped it. “Right now, with our remaining budget, the perfect plan is apparently this one with a discount, see? So in order to use that plan, the printing company said we need to submit the material and data to them during February.”

Hoh, a discount. So they had things like that, too. If they could use up the remainder of their budget with that plan, then it shouldn’t be a problem. It

coincided exactly with the accounting period for next month, so Irohasu was rather good at managing herself!

I thought in attempt to avoid reality, but there's just one thing I couldn't ignore entirely.

Hm? In February? I tilted my head and Isshiki quickly added with a small voice. "…So, there's… about two weeks left."

"Huh? No way, not happening. Two weeks? You're asking for the impossible," I answered instantly with the shake of my hands. Yukinoshita across from me slowly nodded her head.

"That's true. It's not a realistic amount of time to work with. On top of that, if we assume that we need to supervise and check over the publicized content, proofread it, correct it, and make it consistent with other things, we're looking at only one week."

"It got even shorter!?" Yuigahama turned towards Yukinoshita with an astounded face.

"This is merely an ideal schedule in order to publicize the newspaper… Of course, it's far from ideal already with this late of a start. We should stay ahead of schedule while keeping in mind of any potential problems."

Although Yukinoshita explained logically, matter-of-factly even, even she knew it wasn't a very realistic proposal.

"…Of course, this is only under the assumption that we undertake this request." She added, looking at me for confirmation. It looks like she was entrusting the final say to me. The schedule she anticipated was fairly harsh, but it wasn't bad enough that we could consider it absolutely impossible.

One week, huh…? Wait. If I can't work on the weekends and today's day is… I tried adding the days, but somehow, I couldn't do the calculations. *Huuuh? Hachiman-kun, were you really this bad at arithmetic?*

No, the numbers were clearly in my head, but my heart, however, wasn't very accepting of them.

"Okay, tell me something. If we follow the schedule, how many days are there until the deadline…?"

"Umm…" Yuigahama looked up at the ceiling and began counting with her fingers. Her expression turned into a look of surprise.

Yukinoshita looked at me with sorrowful eyes. "…You can still see hope if you don't count the days."

"Saying that already tells me there is no hope…"

This totally won't work out? Yeah? I glanced at Isshiki and even her expression grew dark.

"…I guess… it's no good?" Isshiki whispered intermittently, her voice vulnerable as though she was keeping herself from breaking into a fit of crying. Her eyes became moist and her breaths were laden with heat. Her fists that gripped her skirt weakly trembled. Her thin shoulders skipped and she slowly and timidly looked into my eyes. It's almost as though she was putting her feelings of passion into every single one of her movements that it made me feel like wanting to take up the job.

But not so fast! I was already used to Komachi, my little sister, crying like that! When you're brought up with a sister like her, you end up building a resistance whether you liked it or not! That's why, I was very used to accepting things without hesitation.

"So you just need something done in a few days, right…?" I answered her with a voice that I'd normally use with Komachi. *I hate it! I hate this onii-chan attribute of mine!*

"Thank you soooo much," Isshiki said, smiling as she expressed her appreciation. In contrast, the other two on the side were looking at me with a considerably cold stare and made deep sighs.

"…I see you're as soft as ever."

"W-Well… That's one of Hikki's good points… and also one of his hopeless points."

As Yuigahama made a problematic smile, she also looked at me with cold eyes even though I thought she'd mediate for Yukinoshita.

Er, I'm very sorry… I'm very sorry for causing you so much trouble… Instinctively, I was going to apologize to the two, but the one who originally brought this job to us was Isshiki. She's the one at fault, not me.

I glanced at Isshiki and she was rubbing her chest in relief.

"Phew, you're a real life saver. I was really hoping I could put the things from before under our expenses."

She had an incredibly happy smile in contrast to her laudable attitude from earlier. I mean, I guess it's fine since I had a vague idea that this was going to happen.

But at least keep your sly act up all the way until the end! Good grief, I had absolutely no hopes or dreams.[4]

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It was a pretty harsh schedule, but we somehow managed to settle on something. Developments from here on would influence our costs, but at the current state, there weren't any problems with the budget.

However, we had yet to decide on what to do, the most crucial part.

"Okaaaay, let's begin the planning meeting."

Isshiki announced her words in long-winded fashion. Only Yuigahama gave applause. Although Isshiki initiated the meeting, she faced Yukinoshita in the next instant wondering how to proceed.

After taking her look, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin. “I suppose we should think about the concept first.”

“Wouldn’t what Iroha-chan mentioned earlier be good? Introduction to local fun spots or stores with delicious food or stuff like that.”

“Oh, yes! I think that’s good! I think a plan where we can do all kinds of research and put those under expenses is good!”

Isshiki appeared to be in full agreement with Yuigahama, but what she was saying sounded like she had a completely different objective in mind…

Hearing the two of their opinions, Yukinoshita shook her head. “If we had the time, that would be fine, but given our situation, filling eight pages with just that would be more than we can handle. We need to think about other kinds of articles.”

“Is there anything else you want to do?” Yuigahama asked Isshiki.

Isshiki crossed her arms and tilted her head in contemplation. After groaning for a few minutes, she whispered, “…Not really.”

After listening to her answer, Yukinoshita’s shoulders dropped and Yuigahama wryly smiled. *Well, that’s just how she is…*

Yukinoshita’s proposal—brainstorm from the concept up—was a very by-the-book method. You could even say it’s the proper and correct way when actually publishing a free newspaper. However, in Isshiki’s case, publishing the newspaper aligned with her objective, so the concept was just an after-thought for her.

What we should think about now wasn’t the concept that we, the publishers, would use as a basis for the newspaper, but the concept of how we could capture the attention of the readers.

“If we’re unsure of how to start, why don’t we work backwards from the goal?”

“Huh?”

It looked like my idea didn’t make much sense to Isshiki. She tilted her head in a right angle and looked at me with narrowed eyes. *How irritating… I was actually trying to help, you know…*

But though Isshiki didn’t get it, Yukinoshita certainly did.

“Goal… In other words, you mean the readers?”

“Yeah. We basically narrow our target demographic and cater to what they’d like to read.”

“Readers… So this paper’s just getting passed around in the school?” Yuigahama asked, and Isshiki nodded.

Well, we're ultimately in the dark until the very end, so for now, the appropriate thing to do here was distribute pre-release copies or first editions within the school.

We narrowed our vague target demographic even further.

"So, it'll be around March by then, right? That means the third years will be graduating, so the main targets would be the current first and second years."

"Depending on when the paper is published, we may have to consider targeting upcoming freshmen as well."

"Oh, I get the feeling there'd be more new students who'd look at this!"

"That's true, new students are more likely to take one since it's a bit out of the ordinary for them."

The three of them converged under the same opinion. Now, we determined our main target readership.

After narrowing down our target readership, the remaining thing to do was to plan and adjust our course of action accordingly.

Yukinoshita who had been taking notes stopped writing with her pen. As she reviewed what she wrote down, she opened her mouth.

"If we are going to target the upcoming freshmen, the theme of the paper can be about introducing the school and we can create a section for introducing local spots… That should give us something solid."

"That's pretty common, but it's the conservative way to go for the first issue. If we can tie it in as some kind of new student life guide book, we should be able to make something decent."

"Ohh, that does sound decent…" Yuigahama said, sounding impressed. Similarly, Isshiki clapped her hands as if finding everything so far satisfactory and agreed.

"That sounds good to me! So, how should we go about introducing the school?" Isshiki gave Yukinoshita a look with eyes of expectation. However, Yukinoshita gave back a dull stare, apparently telling her to think for herself. *Ohh, how strict of her…*

With Yukinoshita's cold look at her, Isshiki stammered. As she gave Yukinoshita glances, she timidly spoke.

"We could… p-promote the clubs, or something…? Maybe?"

Isshiki meekly huddled to herself and squeezed her bosom.

In contrast, Yukinoshita silently listened to her and questioned her with a look as to whether that was what she really wanted.

And lastly, Yuigahama watched the two of them nervously.

Silence ruled over the room for the next few moments. In this congealed atmosphere, Isshiki groaned. *Just stop it, you guys! It hurts just watching her, so just tell her she's right, please!*

Though I wasn't sure if my plea had gotten across, Yukinoshita eventually smiled. "…I suppose that's fine."

Yukinoshita brushed her hair at her shoulders and nodded. Isshiki sighed in relief at her side.

"We're going with that, then. Mmkay, so we'll do club introductions. Clubs, clubs…"

Yuigahama gladly nodded as well and began writing down the names of various clubs. Yukinoshita looked over at her notes.

"We should be able to do quite a bit with this amount. I believe it should be about two pages worth."

"It'd be nice if we could get one more page out of it."

Eight pages might've not sounded very much, but in reality, it's quite a lot. It didn't seem that way when you were reading, but when it came to actually filling the pages, it's very time consuming. Even the single page we did for the local magazine last time was pretty painful.

"You're right… I suppose we should select a club and feature them in a large, special article."

"Sounds like the Tennis Club!"

"Sounds like the Soccer Club!"

Isshiki and I answered at nearly the same time to Yukinoshita's suggestion. We then glared at each other.

"It clearly has to be the Tennis Club. Everyone wants to join, you know."

I mean, everyone's read Prince of Tennis, and tennis was getting pretty darn popular nowadays. Isshiki, however, wouldn't budge.

"It obviously has to be the Soccer Club no matter how much you think about it. That's what everyone wants to see, and there's Hayama-senpai." Isshiki argued her position in earnest.

M-Mmm… I kind of lost my ground once Hayama's name popped up… It's certainly true that featuring a photo with Hayama would be met favorably… Like Sagami Minami for example, she seems like she'd take several of them for herself. And then there was Miura who'd swipe a single photo of him when no one was looking. Wait, no, if we featured Totsuka's picture, everyone would definitely—alright, that's out of the question. The only one who should get to enjoy Totsuka's pictures was me!

I fought with my inner demon and groaned in frustration. Yuigahama made a complicated face while watching me.

"Mmm. People might say stuff about us if we give special treatment to just one club…"

"Ahh, I guess we might get some people complaining."

As considerate as always, Yuigahama. That's our Gahama-san. As it turns out, even if our intentions weren't like that, we wouldn't know how others would perceive it. It'd be easier on us if we just followed the template to a T to avoid any needless conflict.

Isshiki, however, had a different opinion. Her eyebrows scrunched together like a frown and displayed her discontent.

"Ehh, can't we just ignore them?"

Ohh, she sure has a strong heart… Though, "It doesn't matter what someone like Isshiki does, someone's going to complain anyway!" might be more accurate here.

Yukinoshita sighed and turned to Isshiki. "It's not that simple. This paper will be sanctioned by the Student Council. There are some things you need to consider with something like this… After all, the one who will be the target of the backlash is you."

Her words were harsh, but her tone was kind and considered Isshiki's well-being.

"…Well, I guess so."

Yukinoshita's words that thought of Isshiki seemed to have gotten through to her as she nodded reluctantly. Although it's a bit hard to tell, Yukinoshita was acting like a proper upperclassman for her.

"Oh, but hey, why don't we ask Hayato-kun? He's the president of the club president meetings, so if we have him act as the representative for all the club presidents, everyone should be fine with that, right?" Yuigahama said with a positive voice, acting as the other good upperclassman to Isshiki.

Isshiki perked up her face and made a sparkling smile. "That sounds good! I'll interview him!"

"Yes, let's fill one page with that interview."

Having figured out our plan, the next thing was to fill in the page with details.

Yukinoshita wrote down a list of things to ask for such as club president names, pictures, and comments to feature on the overview page of the clubs. Isshiki looked at those notes and spoke.

"Are we not going to feature the Service Club?"

Upon mentioning that, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked up and exchanged glances. A short silence was born as though they were checking with each other or unsure. I then broke that silence.

“We don’t need to write anything about this club.”

“Why’s that?”

“Uh, well…”

Isshiki asked me curiously while tilting her head. Because she looked at me directly, I choked on my words. I spat out words that I didn’t really mean in order to smooth it over.

“Come on, it’s embarrassing to write about yourself, right…?” I said.

Yuigahama nodded in realization. “Ugh, that’s true…”

“Besides, no one even knows about this club, so featuring it in the paper isn’t going to make anyone happy.” I continued.

Yukinoshita moved her hand to her chin and thought. “I suppose so, and it’s not like we’re looking for new members…”

“Right? Plus, it’d be easier for us if we prioritize the editing by reducing work where we can.”

Though I was saying that, I was well aware of the actual reason why.

And it was simply because I had no idea what we should write about for this club. I wasn’t sure what to call our club activities or how to define them.

Isshiki opened her mouth as though trying to add another point of her own, but she stopped that with a sigh.

“…Well, if that’s the reason, I guess there’s no helping it.”

For now, it looks like she was convinced. Isshiki quickly took the notes. While fluttering them, she turned to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

“So, is it okay if we use this material for the paper?”

“Yes. Also, regarding the spot introductions…”

Isshiki took out her smartphone after listening to Yukinoshita.

“Oh, actually, I already looked them up. I have some pictures of the stores on my phone.”

“Ohh, I wanna see!”

Isshiki fiddled with her cellphone while Yuigahama watched. Naturally, as the one stuck in between those two, Yukinoshita was further pressed together while looking at Isshiki’s phone.

Isshiki slid her fingers across the screen. For every picture, they'd engage in a girly conversation, "That's soo cute!" "This is so nice, right?" and "Can you move back to that photo just now? Yes, the one with the cat sundries."

I listened to the three's energetic exchange while sitting in my seat that was apart from them. I absentmindedly played with my phone in the meantime.

And suddenly, their chatter stopped.

Having found that odd, I looked at the three of them. Isshiki had an "oops" face. As for Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, they looked at me in fixation.

"Huh, what…?"

"Oh, um, ahaha, it's like, I-I thought it'd be nice if I tried going there, too…"

When I asked, Yuigahama made a reluctant laugh. Next to her, Yukinoshita was wearing an amiable smile.

"…It seems like you enjoyed yourself quite a bit in this picture, didn't you?"

Isn't the room kind of cold? So cold! I wonder if they can fix the heater any faster…?

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Clack, a cup was placed on a saucer.

"In any case, it looks like we won't need to worry about the coverage for the spots."

"Yes, I think so," Isshiki answered while putting her phone away. The pictures Isshiki took during our outing the other day was apparently going to be used for this free newspaper. That's what Isshiki explained it as, anyway. I had no idea how Yukinoshita and Yuigahama took that, but I was released from their cold stares.

"Okay, Iroha-chan will be in charge of that," said Yuigahama, circling her notes. So we had decided on what to do. Now, what's left was to break up our responsibilities. Of course, we had to distribute each page as well, but we divided every duty one by one.

Yukinoshita arranged what was written in the notes. "I'll handle the page layout, schedule, and the design. Yuigahama-san, you'll be in charge of collecting data on the clubs and handling communication with them."

"Roger that!" Yuigahama answered back lively, nodding back.

Then, Yukinoshita glanced at me. "As for Hikigaya-kun…"

"Cameraman, got it."

Cameraman, that is, to take pictures of every club. That basically means I had a legal way of procuring photos of Totsuka. I was so motivated that I'd exclaim, "Leave the cameraman role to me! *Scratch scratch*!" but Yukinoshita's reply was callous.

“You will handle the writing, coverage, photography, planning, production, proofreading, public relations, accounting, and all routine duties.”

Talk about a lot… There are even unnecessary jobs in there, too. I made a vexed look and Yukinoshita glared at me.

“Are you unsatisfied with something?”

Not something, but everything. I thought. Then, Yuigahama patted Yukinoshita’s shoulders.

“O-Okay, okay, Yukinon. We’re already done with the coverage for the stores, so…”

When Yuigahama tried to intervene, Yukinoshita had a slightly objecting face. She then sighed and brushed aside her hair.

“…That’s true. In that case, Hikigaya-kun will be in charge of the writing and routine tasks.”

“…Roger.”

I nodded in consent, making an internal “I gotcha!” side peace ☆ sign. Well, when it came to composing something, I was the right choice for speed. I could imagine Yuigahama and Isshiki making a lot of typos while Yukinoshita’s writing would be pointlessly dry and stiff.

Once we were assigned our roles, we were ready to start working until Isshiki weakly raised her hand. “Umm, what am I supposed to do?”

“That goes without saying. You are the Editor-in-Chief.”

“Ohhh… sounds kinda amazing.”

Yukinoshita stated instantly to which Yuigahama gave her blessing with a round of applause. Well, Isshiki was the one who brought this job to us, so it’s only natural that she was given the position with the most responsibility. Our dear soon-to-be Editor-in-Chief didn’t seem very aware of it and tilted her head.

“What is an Editor-in-Chief supposed to do?”

After hearing that, Yukinoshita sighed in resignation. “Let’s see… First, you should get permission for us to feature information and pictures of the stores in the paper.”

“Yes! I’ll go do that!”

Isshiki’s response was lively, evident that she seemed up for the task. Confirming that, Yukinoshita added further. “Also, we’ll need to secure distribution channels. Have you already decided where to distribute the papers?”

“I guess places like in front of the Student Council Room, faculty lounge, and places where everybody passes by?”

“Well then, go ahead and get permission to use those places.”

“Yes! I’ll go ask Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“Can you make copies of these on your way back as well?”

Yukinoshita handed Isshiki the notes. Isshiki accepted the notes as though pressing them against her chest and saluted.

“Yes, I understand…! Wait, aren’t these just chores?” Isshiki’s shoulders dropped.*Ohh, she noticed.*

“Your job is to supervise and review the entire situation, negotiate with third-parties, do the final check, and provide support where appropriate.” Yukinoshita explained.

Isshiki breathed out in admiration stood up. “Okay, I’ll go tell Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“Please do.”

On her way out the room, just when she passed right by me, she grabbed my sleeve. “Let’s go, senpai.”

“What, go by yourself…”

“Come on, senpai, if you’re there, you can act as the lightning rod—I mean, I might think of something amazing, you know!? I’m really depending on you, senpai!”

You didn’t have to correct yourself… But as Isshiki said, I certainly had my reputation as a lightning rod. If having me present meant the talks would go more smoothly, I should just go and get it over with.

“Alright, let’s go.”

I removed my sleeve from her grip and got up from my seat. And then, Yuigahama noisily stood up from her seat as well.

“Oh, I’ll go too!”

“Jeez… I suppose I’ll have to go as well to explain the documents.” Yukinoshita sighed and quietly left her seat.

“Okay! Let’s all go together!”

Yuigahama took Yukinoshita and Isshiki’s arms and headed for the door. *Mmm, doing that makes the cold hallway look a little bit warmer…*

Well, if the three of them were there, it looks like I wouldn’t need to do anything but stand there. I followed the three of them from behind and we left the clubroom.

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We went inside the faculty lounge, and headed straight for Hiratsuka-sensei’s desk.

Amongst all the desks inside the room, we spotted her sitting at one that was conspicuously messy. She was typing on the computer that was in front of her.

Occasionally, she'd carry soba noodles from her bowl of take-out food on the side to her mouth. *Wow, she's eating something again…*

"Hiratsuka-sensei."

"Hm? Ohh, Hikigaya. What's everyone doing here?"

"We wanted to discuss something with you…"

"Hm? Mmm…" Hiratsuka-sensei shot a glance at her bowl and took a moment to think.

"Please feel free to continue eating," Yukinoshita said.

"Is that so? My apologies."

Hiratsuka-sensei made an apologetic laugh and brought the bowl closer to her hand. Then, she rotated her body halfway on the chair and took her chopsticks.

"So, what is it that you want to discuss?" Hiratsuka-sensei continued after slurping her soba.

"Um, we were thinking of making a free newspaper."

"Free, news, paper?" Hiratsuka-sensei repeated the words in puzzlement, not expecting to hear that.

Isshiki went into the details about her plan of publishing a free newspaper. Yukinoshita would interject where appropriate while presenting the documents, pamphlets, and quotes that outlined everything.

"We have already estimated the costs of the paper and it's feasible to operate within budget. We still only have a rough idea of what the paper will be about, but this is what we have gathered so far."

"Mmhmm." Hiratsuka-sensei looked at all the documents in interest while periodically slurping her soba. Once we flipped through all the documents, she lifted her face looking as though she grasped the general gist of the plan.

"Well, I don't have any problems with what you have… But can't this be done with a mimeograph and straw paper?"

The instant she asked, Yuigahama tilted her head. "Straw paper?"

"Huh? Mimeograph?" Isshiki gave Hiratsuka-sensei a confused, or rather, an impolite look. *Jeez, this girl sure has bad manners…*

If this was the usual Hiratsuka-sensei, she'd give her a taste of her educational crash course, but she didn't seem to be in that mood right now.

"Oh, so you don't know what they are…"

When she feebly mumbled, a tense and self-deprecating smile ran across her face.

"I know about them, but I have never seem them in person…"

“I guess so…”

Yukinoshita stated meekly as though it was the final nail in the coffin and Hiratsuka-sensei responded with a trembling voice. *Well, we can’t do much about machines and raw material getting increasingly more advanced, after all. Then again, it’s kind of suspicious that sensei even knew about a mimeograph… Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I know her age or anything, okay?*

That female teacher of an unknown age—around thirty—slumped over and hugged her bowl of food.

“Well, go ahead and do as you like.”

With just that, she began slurping her slightly expanded soba in sorrow…

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Once we obtained Hiratsuka-sensei’s permission, we were finally able to get down to business.

In fulfilling my responsibility that every individual was assigned, I borrowed the laptop and began my composition on the keyboard.

Then, Yukinoshita walked over to my side and spoke to me.

“Hikigaya-kun, can I have a moment of your time?”

“Mm,” I answered.

Yukinoshita took a seat diagonally from me and expanded the draft table for each page of the newspaper. This table was, simply put, an overview of the layout and content for every page.

Using the tip of the pen, she tapped at one section in the table. “So, our problem is how we want to handle the front cover.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just skip the design and use a picture?”

“Should we try for a simple design like a picture with a caption or a framework with a log?”

“Ahh, maybe we can make it more visible if we do something like *Times* or *Forbes*?”

“Yes, I believe if we make it clear what we want to show, it should stand out more.”

“Less effort for us, too.”

As we were engaged in discussion, I felt distant stares focused on us. I took a look and Isshiki was wincing at us.

“Just what the heck are you two talking about…?”

“Oh, I know, right!? That’s what I’ve been thinking the entire time!” Yuigahama said, pitching forward on the table. *I wonder if she’s happy because she made a friend…* Those two friends, in particular, were apparently creating a

template of questions for every club. We left those two to their own devices since Yukinoshita and I needed to continue with our chat.

Yukinoshita added a note in the table. She then stopped her hand and squished the pen against her cheek.

"So we know what we want for the design, so now the problem is what we want in it."

"Why don't we just use Isshiki's photos? What with being the president and all." I pointed at Isshiki with my index finger.

She shook her hands. "Huh? You mean like gravure pictures? Swimsuits are no good for me, sorry."

"You swear I'd know that… For one thing, no one's expecting stuff like that from you."

What else were you no good with…? Well, that slyness of hers was part of her innocent and pure act, so I guess I had an idea of what. However, someone of my stature was built not to believe in words like purity, amateur things, and magic mirrors.[5]

"…Oh really?"

As though something rubbed her the wrong way, Isshiki's voiced turned cold, the glint in her narrowing eyes also looking sharp. Her mouth then curved downwards and she placed her hand on her bosom while thinking. Eventually, an unpleasant smile appeared on her as as though she thought of something and suddenly spoke in a cheerful and sweet voice.

"Oh gee, I wonder who you're expecting pictures from then, huh? Ohhh, like maybe from Yui-senpai?"

"Wh-Whoa! N-No way! I definitely can't do that, for sure!"

Isshiki pulled Yuigahama down and forced her body forward. The added effect of her body leaning forward emphasized her chest and the flickering glimpses of her skin from behind her flapping collars. In keeping my gaze from instinctively latching onto that view, I forcibly turned it away. *I won't lose! Humans won't lose to things like desires!*

In managing to remove my gaze, I ended up locking eyes with Yuigahama. Her cheeks reddened and she held her shoulders as though to hide her body.

"Ah, um… I-It's kinda embarrassing doing stuff like that… and I don't want other people to see me, and stuff…"

Yuigahama was red down to her neck as she stuttered. When she finished, she gave me a feverish look. Quite frankly, if we featured her on the cover, I'm sure a select group of people would rejoice, bu t I couldn't really feel that way. I mean, look, the person in question clearly didn't like it, see?

"Well, uh, yeah… I definitely wouldn't do that, either."

“R-Really…? Thank goodness.”

The tension dissipated from Yuigahama’s shoulders. Similarly, I let out a deep breath.

But once Yuigahama calmed down, the cause for this conversation came to mind.

“Anyway, gravure doesn’t mean just swimsuit photos. What was it, rotogravure? That’s called gravure too, I think.”

Right, Yukipedia-san? I looked at Yukinoshita, and she was fiddling with her ribbon neck tie. When our eyes met, she had a look of surprise and promptly averted her face. She retied her ribbon afterwards.

“……”

I could hear her make a shallow sigh. *Could you, like, not go quiet at a time like this…?*

“Anyway, photos of your regular uniform is good enough. Okay, next. Yukinoshita, what should we do about the back cover?” I asked Yukinoshita, changing the subject. She then gave me a momentary look as though examining me. While she didn’t respond, she was all ears. I went ahead and continued.

“Should we put advertisements on the back? Like for mysterious prayer beads, or speed reading techniques, or strength training equipment, or even health products?” I said, imagining how funny it’d be to take pictures of Zaimokuza bathing in a tub full of bank notes. Eventually, Yukinoshita opened her mouth.

“Looking for places that’ll let us place their ads at this point isn’t very realistic. It may be something to consider if we’re doing periodical publications, but that may not be feasible this time. We don’t have the material for it either, so we should fill it with text.”

Her gaze was still glued to the table draft as she spoke in disinterest. I took a moment to think.

“So either a magazine column or a postscript from the editor… Well, I can handle that.”

“Yes, please do,” Yukinoshita answered briefly. She began working her hand again but continued to look away from me. Unlike earlier, her pen squeaked a lot louder. *I wonder if she’s still concerned from earlier… She really doesn’t need to let it bother her, too…*

It’s okay! You still have some hope left! And I mean genetically!

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Now then, my assignment was the writing for all things related and photography that I had desired so much for. But in turn, that also meant having to be present in the interviews for every club. With so little time on our hands, our coverage team was split into pairs. Isshiki and I were one pair while Yuigahama and Yukinoshita were the other. After averaging out our communication and

academic ability, well, I suppose this was the right way to split up. Isshiki and I handled the male clubs while Yuigahama and Yukinoshita handled the female clubs…

The first club to interview was… the Tennis Club, of course!

Yuigahama had already made prior appointments, so Isshiki and I arrived at the tennis courts with winds fiercely blowing through them.

"Your receive is too slow! You can do a little better than that!"

The cute voice that resounded throughout the courts belonged to the captain of the Tennis Club, Totsuka. With his racket resting against his shoulder and his other hand on his waist, he yelled out advice to his underclassmen. It looks like he was already accustomed to being the captain.

Upon arriving at the junctures of the tennis courts, Totsuka noticed us. He jogged over to us while waving his hand.

"Hachiman! Hello to you too, Isshiki-san."

"Hello there, thank you for your time today."

"Sorry for interrupting your practice."

Following along with Isshiki's respectful bow, I did a ceremonious chop with my hand as a form of greeting to Totsuka.

"Oh no, not at all! Um, you're taking pictures, right? Feel free to start whenever you'd like." Totsuka shook his head. After, he stretched out his hands and turned towards the entirety of the courts. He then rotated his head our way and smiled. *Yep, I'd say we're perfectly ready to go!*

"Alright, let's get started…"

Since Totsuka looked so cute spreading his hands out like that, I started off first with a photo of that. I posed with the camera and pressed the shutter. In doing so, Totsuka looked confused—I took another picture. He cutely tilted his head to which I took another shot. I was just about to take another one of Totsuka's curious look, but just as I readied the camera into position, he opened his mouth in bewilderment.

"Um… aren't you going to take pictures of our practice?"

"Yeah, you're right. You're right, but this comes first." I declared to him, taking a considerably forceful and open tone. Totsuka faltered in the face of my intensity.

"R-Really…? It's kinda embarrassing… mmm…"

Totsuka placed his hand on his cheeks to hide his embarrassment from taking photos and brooded over it. But after a glance towards the tennis courts, he muttered. "But we might get new members if they see this…"

“That’s right, it’s possible the new students will use these photos to decide what to do.”

When Yuigahama went to make appointments with every club, we also had her inform them of the objective of this free newspaper. For the clubs, this was a perfect chance to promote themselves. When I responded to him, Totsuka lifted his face as though to ready himself.

“I-I’ll try my best…”

He then clenched his fists in front of his chest and looked motivated.

“Y-Yeah…? Alright, let’s do our best.”

It’s fine that I was able to convince Totsuka, but somehow, I was starting to feel like I had deceived him into a photo shoot. *This feeling of guilt… No, wait. This isn’t guilt, but…… immorality! Heck, in a different sense, I was raring to go now!*

“Alright, let’s go nuts with the pictures.”

“Yeah!”

After hearing his spunky reply, I readied the camera.

“Can you try taking a stance with your racket this time?”

“S-Sure.”

I took shots from a low angle of Totsuka swinging his racket as well as spectacular shots of Totsuka in animated motion. I captured Totsuka hold his ground with a step when he lost his balance in the viewfinder. Shutter chance!

I took shots of Totsuka in motion to my heart’s content and proceeded onto the next stage.

“Next, can you try hugging your racket?”

“Sure… Hmm?” Totsuka bended his head in puzzlement while hugging his racket to his chest. That’s where I took consecutive shots, spectacular shots, and even panoramic shots. While we’re at it, let’s throw an optional towel in there. *That’s good, that’s real good. Let’s get a little bolder, why don’t we?* I continued taking photos in that enthusiastic fashion. Beside me, Isshiki was looking rather dismayed.

“Senpai, haven’t you taken enough photos already…?”

“Really? Well, I guess so.”

“Yes.” Isshiki nodded. Indeed, Isshiki had a point.

“True, I guess we have enough of the racket. Let’s take pictures without it this time.”

“Huh?” Isshiki went stiff.

Ignoring her, I looked into the viewfinder and thought about what to take photos of next.

"Totsuka, can you do this for a bit?"

"…Sure."

Totsuka's response was somewhat dispirited, as though he was a bit exhausted. I know what this is. He's reacting like my house cat that'd lose all his energy from posing too much. In other words, he was that much cute!

Heeding my instructions, Totsuka set his racket down at his feet and sat down hugging his knees. I took shots of him at a front angle and a diagonal angle. I had him take even more varied poses going through a pattern of consent with his gaze. As for his gaze, he was stuck between a smile and a look of boredom.

"H-Hachiman… Are you still taking more?" Totsuka said with a stiff smile and a broken voice.

"O-Oh, right…"

I guess Totsuka's kind of tired right now. What should we do…? I thought, and it hit me.

"Let's take a quick break, then."

"So you're still going to continue…" Totsuka's shoulders dropped.

Yep, so I wasn't mistaken in choosing to take a break now, after all. To prepare for the second half of the photo shoot, I fiddled with the camera and checked the pictures taken thus far. I then realized something important.

"Isshiki."

I called Isshiki, who had long given up on dealing with me and watched us from afar. She walked over with an annoyed look.

"Yes?"

"Do you have spare memory cards? This one's, like, out of space."

"Just how many pictures did you take…?"

"I actually already got rid of the extra images, though…" I said.

Isshiki let out a deep sigh and grabbed my sleeve. She then pulled on it and began walking.

“We have enough already! Totsuka-senpai, thank you very much,” Isshiki said.

“Ah, sure. Thank you too, like really.” Totsuka made a sudden smile and answered back, having been depressed while hugging his knees and sitting on the floor.

By all means possible, I wanted to capture that smile of his in a photo, but with Isshiki reeling me in by my sleeve, I wasn’t granted the wish of consecutive or spectacular shots. At the very least, I turned his smile into a photographic memory to be stored in the album of my heart.

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Isshiki dragged me along by my sleeve and before long, we were at the Soccer Club.

The fields the Soccer Club practiced on was right beside the tennis courts, so it wasn’t very far. I might as well add that I didn’t have all that much interest in the Soccer Club, either.

I figured we could just be on our way after two or three shots of them, but Isshiki wouldn’t allow that.

“Ohh, please focus a shot on Hayama-senpai over there. Oh, right there, right there!”

Isshiki tapped my shoulders and designated specific moments for a shot. After taking the pictures, we checked over each picture one by one.

“Please let me see… Oh, some of these have Tobe-senpai in them, so I’m gonna delete them, okay?” she said, and deleted the pictures. She then pushed the camera back to me.

Oh, come on, what’s the big deal? It’s just Tobe… No one’s going to care if he’s there or not, you know?

This continued on for a little longer, so we weren’t making much progress.

“Hey, this is enough, right? There’s no more memory…”

“And whose fault do you think that is?” Isshiki puffed her cheeks and glared at me with a sidelong glance.

Not much I could say against that. Ultimately, I was forced into taking pictures of the soccer mini-game until it ended.

Once it finally finished, Hayama walked over to us.

“Hayama-senpaaaai!” Isshiki yelled out while waving her hand.

Hayama lifted his hand back. “So I heard from Yui that you’re making a free newspaper of the sort? You’re doing whatever you’re asked to like always, huh?”

Hayama made an invigorating smile while being subtly astonished.

“I already told you that’s just how our club works. I don’t want to hear that from someone going out of his way to stop practice early just for an interview. Sorry for bothering you.”

“That’s a funny way to show your gratitude.” He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Then, he looked towards the courtyard. “It’s cold here, right? How about we do the interview over there?”

“Oh, sure.”

Since the pilotis area of the courtyard was surrounded by the school building, the winds didn’t pass through. With a happy smile, Isshiki led the way towards a good spot. The spot she went to had a vending machine with a simple bench on the side. Isshiki took a seat and patted the seat next to her, motioning for us to come over. *How sly…*

I let Hayama go first while I went to buy a can of black coffee and black tea from the vending machine. As I juggled the hot cans hand to hand, I sat across Hayama.

“Just say random stuff. You’re pretty good at that, right?”

I tossed him the canned coffee as I spoke. When Hayama accepted it, he looked at it in surprise. He then briefly sighed and made a strained laugh. With a mocking tone, he said, “Are you being sarcastic?”

“Just praising you. I don’t really care, but we’re counting on you.”

“…Well, I’ll try to meet your expectations to the best of my ability,” Hayama said, and smiled. He raised his hand at me and faced Isshiki.

“Okaaaay, let’s begin the interview!”

Isshiki started the voice recorder on her smartphone and set it aside her tea. I took two steps away from them and readied the camera. The Hayama beyond the viewfinder was, as I thought, the Hayama Hayato that everyone knew. However, the joking and wryly smiling Hayama from just a moment ago felt slightly different.

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We wrapped up our interview and photo shoot with Hayama. Afterwards, we visited all the other clubs, subsequently finishing them up as well. We even managed to get a shot of Hayama opening his hands upwards, so quality wasn’t a concern.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita should’ve been about done on their end with female clubs, too. The remaining job was to take photos of Isshiki Iroha for the front cover of the newspaper.

As per the request of the model Isshiki, we relocated to the library for the photo shoot.

We went through the front entrance from the courtyard, changed into our indoor loafers, passed by the faculty lounge, and entered the library.

In the later hours of after school, the library was rarely used by students. A peaceful atmosphere permeated the room.

"So, why the library…?"

Isshiki surveyed the library and walked around to find a suitable place for photos. When I asked her from behind, she turned around. "Isn't the library, like, very intellectual?"

"What an unintellectual thing to say…"

"That's fine. This is a matter concerning my image." She turned her face away and began walking, making several stops. And finally settling on a spot, she took a seat at a table with her back against the bookshelves. Then, she took out her compact mirror and started fixing up her appearance.

The tall bookshelves loomed over Isshiki as a protector of the sort, and the dark-colored book spines contrasted with Isshiki's gaudiness. The lights were bright in the library in the evening, a form of consideration to make it easier for readers, and they served to show Isshiki's white skin imbued with a slight color of warmth.

I didn't know very much as an amateur, but I felt Isshiki's appearance could make for a pretty picture. That's what you could expect from Isshiki Iroha; she was fully aware of how to exhibit her charm.

"Alright, I'll take some shots." I called out to Isshiki. She answered by resting her cheeks in her hands and her elbows on the desk.

Her moist eyes and her long eyelashes in her inviting upwards expression was impressive and despite the innocence in her somewhat elated smile, her cherry lips glazed softly.

Even though I had the lens directed at her, I had forgotten to press the shutter. It's only after I heard a cough that I came back to my senses.

I pressed the shutter several times and lowered the camera. As I checked over the photos I had just taken, I spoke to Isshiki in a way to cover up my earlier moment of absentmindedness.

"You seem pretty used to taking pictures…" I said.

Isshiki was about to change her pose and looked into her mirror while thinking. After facing the mirror, she tilted her head. "Really? Isn't it normal to take pictures all the time?

"Not all the time."

I felt it was only during extraordinary events like field trips or events that I would take pictures that could be left as commemorations and as memories. At least, that's how it had been for my entire life so far.

But Isshiki was saying something entirely else. She closed the compact mirror and glanced at me. Even though the camera wasn't focused on her, her smile was soft.

"Memories are important, don't you think?"

That was something normal to Isshiki Iroha.

She was saying that even the typical scenery that never saw any change and didn't distinguish between what was normal and extraordinary was a memory to be cherished.

"…I suppose," I answered briefly, and I positioned the camera again. *Now then, let's think. Will these photos be the memories of what's ordinary, or the memories of what's extraordinary?* I thought as I pressed the shutter.

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Having amassed most of the material for the paper, we began working. A few days had passed since then. The club introductions and the spot guide proceeded forward smoothly and the interview article was mostly finished. The design was making favorable progress and we filled in each page one by one starting from the first.

As for all the articles, just a few caption and header adjustments and they were more or less done. Featured comments from the club presidents had their wording revised and that, too, was almost finished.

Progress was good. It should've been good.

We also made sure to flavor the articles featuring the clubs, recommended spots, and interviews with Isshiki lingo. We received confirmation from every club for their photos as well. We even humored Isshiki's sudden desire to fix the front cover which went by without a hitch.

Yet. Yet, despite all of this, my writing had yet to end.

"How did this even happen…?"

Was it because I was taking this seriously? Indeed, I was working seriously; not only did I do the writing for the normal articles, I helped Yukinoshita, and I went to the Game Club for their comments in place of Yuigahama.

For someone like me, I worked pretty hard, spending the the past few days up until today being very busy. Maybe that's why… When you got too busy, you'd end up forgetting about your other jobs…

I had an entire column to write, to the point where it was "two days until the deadline!"

As I held my head in my hands, Isshiki stood next to me. She then poured me some tea from a bottle.

"Here you go, drink this. Please do your best," she said. She put away the bottle inside the mini-fridge that was under the table. Afterwards, she took a seat at another desk that was diagonally opposite from mine.

The tea, the desks, the seats, and lastly, the room were all different from the usual.

Presently, I was confined to the Student Council Room, forced to write the rest of the magazine column all the while being under surveillance. Because our clubroom's heater was still broken, the Student Council Room arranged by Isshiki was offered as the alternative for my confinement.

I glanced at the window and it was already sundown. Normally, I'd use my cellphone instead of a watch to check the time, but I didn't have the means because my phone had been confiscated. I surveyed the room and stumbled upon a table clock, its hands pointing at cruel numbers.

I was brought to this room immediately after school and had yet to take a foot outside since then. That's because the deadline was tomorrow.

Ooooooooooooh crap… I haven't written a single thing… I can't imagine me finishing on time at all…

I mashed the keyboard in an attempt to get something down only to erase it all because it wasn't to my liking. I went through many iterations doing just that. *Crap, craaaaaaaaaaaap. At this rate, we're not going to make it in time, ahhhhhhhhhhh!*

As I flailed around at my desk, Isshiki looked at me while backing away. Her expression looked like she wanted to say, "Ugh…" as she shook her head. Then, something caught her attention and she began sifting through her blazer's pocket.

"Senpai, phone," she said, and took out my cellphone from her pocket, trying to hand it over to me.

However, a call right before an upcoming deadline was never anything good. In the first place, if you're going to make demands like that, there wouldn't be any need for anime recaps. Postponing the release date because the author said so didn't exist either.

That's why at times like these, it's best to check the caller and then ignore the call.

"…From who? The editor?" I asked.

Isshiki sighed in disbelief. "If an editor's the first thing you think of, the situation must be bad… Umm… Oh, it says 'Mom." Maybe it's from your mom?"

"…The editor's… mom…? Are they keeping watch over me under the guise of family?"

"No, why would you even think of that? It's senpai's mom, I think."

"Right. Just leave it, I'll call her back later."

“Oh, if you say so.”

Isshiki answered back briefly and placed the cellphone back in her pocket. She then flipped and checked over a good stack of papers, perhaps for the fiscal year-end, occasionally stamping them.

Having her working on the side only made me feel like I should actually get my work done… Reluctantly, I began tampering with the keyboard.

And so, another period of time passed by.

It was already dark outside the window, nearing the time for when students should head home. I stopped hearing the sound of stamping, not noticing that Isshiki had already finished her work. I glanced over at her and she was staring at her smartphone.

Can I stop here for today, too…? There’s still tomorrow. And I can just try harder tomorrow. I’ll be done by then…

The instant the thought ran across my mind, my concentration vanished in a puff of smoke.

“I’m done, I just can’t write anymore today. I’m not going to get much written when I’m panicking like this. I guess the only thing I can do now is go home and get some sleep.” I declared, loudly.

Isshiki lifted her face from her smartphone and looked at me. After sighing in disbelief, she made a kind expression. “Right, well, I guess that might be a good idea.”

“I know, I know. It’s okay if we miss the deadline by a little bit, right?”

Is this what you’d call writer’s high? Burdened with excess stress right before the deadline, exhausted from continuous labor, and the mysterious feeling of exaltation from trying to escape reality, I found myself letting out a nefarious chuckle.

Isshiki then made a stiff look. “…Huh? You’re not going to make it?”

“W-Well, I’m not sure…”

But really, this column only had to be about a couple thousand of words at best, so if I just did my best today and tomorrow, I had the feeling I could finish. But it wasn’t that simple since I only managed to get several hundreds of words in a few hours.

I was hesitant to say that out loud. The reason being, Isshiki was holding her head before I could even explain it to her.

“Oh no… That’s not good… Umm, isn’t that, like, really bad?”

Isshiki groaned and fell forward on her desk. She slowly turned her head towards me and her eyes were slightly cloudy. Right after, she murmured in a

small voice, “The expenses! The discount! The extra charges! Over the budget! The account expenditures!” and shook.

Her reaction told me everything. Isshiki expected us to finish in time for the discount plan and accounted for that in the budget. And she had likely already noted it in her financial report.

Of course, it should still be possible to make revisions to the report.

But this was the consequence of the pride of Somethingaya Somethingman; despite his grandstanding of how he’d get something done in a few days, he kept putting his work off while going, “No worries, no worries, I can do it super fast.” It’s not good to be prideful…

“…I-I guess it’s bad… yeah. I-I’ll try a little harder, okay?”

“R-Really? Please do…”

Isshiki looked up at me with moist eyes. Her eyes didn’t look sly in the least which was exactly why the normally childish Isshiki appeared more honest. *Having seen her like that, I had to get this done no matter what…*

There’s a deadline that must absolutely not be missed.

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To tell you the truth, I can’t do it anymore. I’m sorry for saying this so suddenly. But I just can’t.
In just a few hours, the incredibly normal chime will sound.
That’s the sign of the deadline.
Be careful of the small-chested editor who will come before long.
When that comes, the end will come in just a few moments later.[6]

These thoughts ran through my hollow head.

Bogged down by the deadline that must absolutely not be missed—I was already longing for the time after school of the following day—I was borrowing the Student Council Room today like the other days, doing isolated work in a different room.

Although I tried to do what I could yesterday after garnering my motivation, my body eventually reached its limit like Chiyonofuji Mitsugu[7] and I went home. While I did make some semblance of progress after getting home and doing some writing on my smartphone during class, the end was still nowhere in sight.

And now, from the window of the empty Student Council Room, I was staring up at the declining sun. Of course, there’s no progress with my manuscript.

Crap, crap… I wasn’t even typing on the keyboard, yet I was clattering in my seat. Then, there were knocks on the door of the room.

“Hey Hikki, how’s it going?”

Entering the room with a greeting was Yuigahama. It looks like she was here to check on my progress.

"…I-I guess there's a little below seventy percent, yeah."

"Whoa, that's amazing!"

"Of what's left…."

The instant I whispered that, Yuigahama let out a tragic whine. I, too, wanted to whine from my own predicament…

As I hung my head in dejection, Yuigahama walked up to my desk and tapped my shoulder. "You can do it! Don't worry, we'll definitely make it! I'm gonna do my work here with you, too!"

Saying that in a situation like this only sounds like you're here to monitor me…

I'd normally refuse doing any work while under surveillance, but such was the situation. Keeping me on my toes was the only way to keep me from shirking my duties. Well, if this was a part-time job, I definitely would've ignored my responsibilities. But with Isshiki yesterday and Yuigahama today watching me, I had to get my work finished. Boys, you see, were rather obstinate creatures…

I got motivated again and faced my manuscript. I moved the cursor to where I had left off to continue my last progress. After squeezing out several lines of words, I was assaulted by despair yet again. Every time the white chunk of space was burned into my eyes, reality would look straight at me and tell me I wasn't outputting enough for how much time I was spending.

In one day, I only managed to get a little less than twenty percent done. There was about eighty percent left and doing all of that in the next few hours was physically impossible. If I somehow managed to make it in time, the law of the universe would be broken![8]

Ugh… As I was overwhelmed by reality, there was another sound different from my key presses on the side. I looked over to Yuigahama and she was using a calculator with her ball pen.

"…What are you doing?" I asked.

Yuigahama placed the pen behind her ear and faced me. "Hm? Oh, umm, I'm calculating how much money was used so far. It seemed kinda off when I glanced over the reports."

"Isshiki's kind of sloppy with the math, after all…"

"Ahh, that's true… Well, that's where Yukinon or even I come in!" Yuigahama said, wryly smiling. She appeared almost like an older sister. I'm sure she was taking proper care of Isshiki as an underclassman.

The only problem was how that cute underclassman would always bring nothing but bothersome things to us. Actually, her circumstances behind her first visit to the clubroom were pretty outrageous…

However, this might just be the reality of things when getting work.

One person would make a big lie. Then, that lie would turn into something tangible, causing work to come in. In society, a big liar like that was also known as a producer. So in that sense, Isshiki might have the qualities of a producer. For this request in particular, Yukinoshita would be something like a director while Yuigahama would be an AD. As for me this time or rather, as always, I was the low class, subcontracting corporate slave.

I faced the computer again to do my work like a grunt. But I went through another cycle of writing and deleting lines, so I wasn't getting much done.

At some point, it started to feel like I was spending more time looking outside the window at the setting sun or even staring at the desk clock than I was looking at the screen of the computer.

The passage of time alone was enough to drive your mind into a corner. I unconsciously let out a deep sigh, also feeling the effects of exhaustion from sitting and facing the computer for so long.

"You okay, Hikki?"

Yuigahama rose from her seat, having heard my loud sigh, and took a few steps towards me, standing at my side. She then looked down into my face with concern.

She was so close that the stretch of my hand would allow me touch her face. We could even hear each other's breathing. Our closeness and the embarrassment from our eyes meeting caused me to pretend to crack my neck and turn away.

"The schedule isn't looking too good at this rate…" I grumbled, attempting to gloss over that moment. Then, both my shoulders suddenly got heavier.

"If we don't make it in time, then we don't make it."

When I turned my head around, Yuigahama was resting her small hands on my shoulders. Her slender fingers curled into a fist, gripping at the shoulder blades of my blazer.

"I'll apologize together with you and I'm sure Iroha-chan will understand, too. It's a pretty unreasonable request from the start, anyway."

"True, it was unreasonable."

As I spoke, I wriggled my body to escape from her hands, but she didn't let go. Eventually, she began hitting my shoulders lightly in short intervals.

"It's not like it's your fault, Hikki. Even if you give up now, no one's going to blame you. And this isn't really something we have to get done."

Her words were a little unexpected. It's because Yuigahama had never expressed clear refusal of any of the requests the Service Club had accepted thus far.

With a feeling of bewilderment, I found myself turning around to see Yuigahama wearing a frail smile.

"…I don't really like seeing you in pain, Hikki."

"Saying that is unfair."

Despite my outburst, I could tell how soft my tone was. Perhaps it was my exhaustion. Being told something like that with such a gentle voice along with the shoulder massage only caused my shoulders to relax.

Simultaneously, I tensed my shoulders again.

For a wonderful girl to give me those kinds of words, this was nowhere near the time to give up and run away. It's when you were given these kind and sweet words that you mustn't rely on them and abandon yourself to. That's why it only gave me less of a choice to resign here no matter how idiotic the circumstances are or how difficult the problem is.

"You think so…?" Yuigahama stopped her hands and rested them on my shoulders, eventually lifting them up slowly.

"Oh, uh, it was more like a figure of speech."

I chose the wrong words when I called the person who was worried for me unfair. I rotated my chair and turned my body towards Yuigahama. I sat there while digging around for the proper words to tell her. Yuigahama, however, didn't give me the time and nodded.

"…Yeah, I think I am unfair!" Yuigahama said, her voice cheerful and as though she was convinced of something.

I didn't quite catch the meaning behind her response, but I wanted to get the right nuance across to her and opened my mouth.

"I didn't mean it like that, but uh, in a good way…"

Yuigahama, however, shook her head and interjected. "I think… I really am unfair… It's because I can never stop you or even help you. And also… for a bunch of other things."

Yuigahama's words were in a jumble, perhaps because she was trying to think while she talked. But it's due to that that I felt her words were from the bottom of her heart. In the same way she'd laugh to hide her embarrassment or mumble her words and look away, I'm sure she wanted to play it off somehow.

But even so, she looked straight at me, as though wanting to tell me everything.

"That's why… That's why, when something like this happens again, I'll make sure to do it."

Her sincere expression and her slowly weaved words were imbued with a sense of reality but also an empty ambiguity. Eventually, everyone would make sure to do it. They had to, even if they didn't know what it is that they needed to do or if they could do it. I'm sure that's something that everyone thinks about, even if vaguely.

I was, of course, no exception. That's why, for the time being, I needed to do the things that were right before my very eyes. I rotated my seat and faced the computer again.

"It's not a big deal. I'm always the one selfishly doing it. You're not at fault for stopping me. If anything, the ones who make inconsiderate promises are at fault… That's why, uh… I'll see what I can do."

"…Oh… Okay, let's do our best, then!" Yuigahama said, her voice lively, and she gave my back a strong push.

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No, no! I wanna go home! I don't know anymore! Forget submitting the draft and proofreading it! I'm tired of looming deadlines and being confined in this room! I'm not working or doing the manuscript anymore!

I shouted in a fit and fell forward onto my desk. Right now, I was the only one in the Student Council Room. I screamed as much as I wanted.

I handed Yuigahama a data printout in the middle of my work and she went to give it to Yukinoshita. When she left, I was sapped of my concentration.

Well look, I somehow managed to get eighty percent of the column done. I received some motivation from Yuigahama, so I think I had done some pretty good work, especially considering it's me.

But for the remaining twenty percent, not a single, worthwhile sentence came to mind, and I was stuck looking up at the ceiling while resting against the back of my chair. *Ahh, can't the Illuminati just come here? I'd really like to be free from this job forever already, please.*

I, for one, think concentration was a spontaneous thing and not a continuous thing. Instead of doing all-nighters for a couple days where you wouldn't make much progress, it's important to do it in a systematic and regular fashion. Though, all of that didn't really matter when you realized there's a deadline right around the corner. It's like the day before an exam, seriously.

I continued to stare up at the ceiling like a dead battery and there were knocks on the door. With no spare energy to answer, I turned only my eyes towards the door and the person came in the room regardless of a response.

"Done?"

The one who came in and asked with a bag over her shoulder was Yukinoshita.

"…If I was, I would've let you know."

"That's certainly true," Yukinoshita said in agreement. Then, she walked up next to me and took out a printout marked in red from her bag.

"This is from earlier. There are unfinished sentences in the latter half."

"R-Right."

I took the printout from her and did a quick scan. Along with unfinished sentences, I came across several errors. I updated the manuscript with the fixes and I could still feel a presence next to me.

"…Do you need something?"

"Ah, no… There isn't anything in particular."

Yukinoshita sounded flustered when she spoke and quietly crossed her hands behind her. She then took a step back and pulled out the seat that was beside me. After taking a moment to dig through her bag, she eventually took out a clear file and began working on something.

It looks like Yukinoshita came here to work as well as watch over me. The fact that she was here meant that we were in the final stretches before the deadline.

Pressure or not, I already knew the horrors of the deadline.

Once I finished making the revisions on the manuscript from the printout I accepted earlier, I scrolled the screen down to finish the remaining twenty percent.

Only several hundred more words to go.

If I could write that much, I could fill up all the space on the page.

I could, but if I produced something incredibly poor, the one who would be the subject of backlash would be the Editor-in-Chief, Isshiki. Thoughtlessly accepting the task only to turn a blind eye to Isshiki getting the brunt of things wasn't something I could do.

To avoid that, it ultimately meant producing something of quality. Rather, if I submitted something poor, first and foremost, the editor Yukinoshita as well as the Editor-in-Chief Isshiki would tell me to do a retake on the manuscript. I might as well do it seriously from the beginning if it meant having to revise everything.

I mustered what remained of my willpower and continued pounding away at the keyboard. The digital display at the bottom of the screen would tick by, minute by minute, and the empty space would fill in, line by line.

Before long, my hands halted in place, not moving an inch. Unconsciously, I let out a disheartened voice.

"…It's over."

"Oh, really?"

Apparently hearing my voice, Yukinoshita had an overjoyed face and was about to stand up. I raised my hand to stop her and slumped over, lying on the desk.

"It's over, it's all over. It's impossible, I can't do it. I can't think of anything. I can't think of a single word anymore…"

"That's what you meant…" Yukinoshita sighed in astoundment and sat back in her seat. "But we can't have that. We barely have any time left, you know?"

“Well, yeah, I know that, but…”

I was so aware of it that I was sick of it. But my brain just wouldn’t function no matter how much I wanted it to. My brain was always resistant to labor, so I was starting to feel nothing could be done at this point. In the same way you’d wring a wet towel until the very last drop, not a single word came to mind.

I fell backwards onto my chair and looked up at the ceiling. *I’m all out of options…*

I left my curled hands on the keyboard despite not moving them. With my hands like that and my body facing up at the heavens, I resembled the corpse of an insect. *I’m nothing more than an insect… A small and incompetent insect that can’t even make a deadline. Let’s call myself Hachiman the Insect from now on. And let’s cast aside my human shell into the sea…*

I stared at the ceiling peacefully and Yukinoshita entered my field of vision. As she looked down at me, her face looked somehow anxious.

“…Here, take this.”

As Yukinoshita spoke, she quietly set something wrapped in a handkerchief near my chest.

I lifted my face and took the wrapped object from her; it was slightly warm. The handkerchief was decorated with an adorable design of cat paws. After unwrapping it, what came out was a can of MAX COFFEE. It looked like she tried her best at keeping it warm.

Seeing that brought a smile to my face.

“Take a breather. You’re not going to get anything done if you’re staring at the screen the entire time. It’d be better if you take a short break,” Yukinoshita said, abruptly looking away. She went back to her seat and resumed her work.

“Thanks…”

I appreciatively accepted her offering and decided to make use of it. I snapped the tab of the MAX COFFEE can and drank it while watching Yukinoshita’s profile in a daze.

In the meantime, Yukinoshita’s hands didn’t stop. She was silent and only the sounds of red pen writing on the paper could be heard. Nevertheless, I felt the frequency of the sounds was a little odd.

“…Sorry, is it that bad?”

“Eh?”

When I asked her, Yukinoshita turned her face towards me. She then dropped her gaze to the paper at her hands, understanding what I meant. While rolling the red pen along her lips, she opened her mouth.

“…There are mistakes, but they’re at most misspellings and typos. There isn’t anything glaringly wrong, so don’t worry. Rather, it’s the other two who had far

more typos," Yukinoshita said with a teasing tone and chuckled. She looked much more her age like that, taking a much more cherubic appearance.

"Well, you were making a lot of red marks, so it got me a bit worried."

"Oh. You only forgot to add some notes near the words, so I'm just adding those in. I make revisions as I go along."

"Sorry for the trouble."

I thought I was being casual in stating that, but Yukinoshita stopped her hands and gently set aside her red pen on the table. She then lowered her shoulders in discouragement.

"…I'm sorry, too. I should've checked on your progress when I had the chance. I should've known that even you can make mistakes."

"Ah, no, it was just a miscalculation on my part. Actually, is that, like, some kind of super high-grade sarcasm…?" I asked.

Yukinoshita smiled and shook her head. "That's certainly part of it, but… it essentially means that it was my miscalculation as well."

So you really were being sarcastic…

Either way, there's no doubt that the both of us had made the wrong call. Whether it was me, her, or ourselves, we still had yet to come to an understanding. And that was presently like the state of the sky that expanded beyond the window, the sky that belonged to any one person. While you were unable to distinguish between noon and night, the moment you could tell was the moment the color of would change, moment by moment.

"In the end, I'm the one who's unable to do anything the most," Yukinoshita muttered, looking at the indistinct sunset.

"You've done more than enough. It's not like Yuigahama and I are any good at scheduling. Isshiki's pretty good at bragging and making ends meet, but she's not exactly the type that can plan things…"

While answering, I looked at the same sunset. Regardless, it's likely the color we were seeing were different. Red, pink, or scarlet. Perhaps, vermillion or even dark red. It may very well be orange. But no matter what the color, it wouldn't have bothered me.

"So, uh… you've been a huge help."

I took my eyes off the window and returned them back to the Student Council Room.

The setting sun poured into the room, dying it red. When I turned to Yukinoshita beside me, her downcast expression was unperceivable. But her ears and her nape that peeked out from between the gaps of her hair was submerged in scarlet.

"…If that's what you think, then I hope so." Yukinoshita sighed, and muttered with a low voice, as though having no confidence, or perhaps, as though she was sulking.

However, that was at most only an instant. She promptly lifted her face, brushed aside her hair at her shoulder, and with her voice no more chilly than the usual, she said, "I'll make some adjustments to the work at the end and buy you some time."

"Ah, s-sure… Huh, you can do that?" I asked, but Yukinoshita didn't answer.

Instead, she started dialing a number with her cellphone.

"…Yuigahama-san? Change of plans. In case the manuscript isn't completed in time, fill the rest with as much text as you can and submit it. As for the last portion, enter in dummy text. We'll proofread it and revise it then. That's all. Can you let Isshiki-san know as well…? Yes, please do."

After Yukinoshita cut the call, she directed her gaze at me as though to confirm I had heard all that.

"…Is that okay?"

"It's simply an emergency countermeasure in the event we don't make it on time. We've already factored the extra expenses that will come with making corrections in the budget, so there shouldn't be a problem. I'm afraid we may not be able to do a final check on everything, but… there's little we can do given the situation," Yukinoshita said, and smiled. In order to deal with any unforeseen accidents, she prepared a schedule with a buffer as a last resort.

Good grief. She's the one always telling me how soft I was, but who exactly was the soft one here?

Well, I couldn't deny that I was a softie. But a softie could easily be an antagonistic demon. But that's exactly why I wanted to turn down being pampered like this.

I swallowed the rest of my MAX COFFEE and forcefully put the can aside. The table clanked when the can came in contact with the steel desk.

"Time to finish up," I said, and faced the computer once again.

"…I see. In that case, do your best."

As short as her soft words were, they were more than enough to reach my ears.

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It might've been because of the quick break, or the sugar from the MAX COFFEE that fueled my brain, but my hands continued typing, aiming to fill the remaining blank space.

I continued writing without heeding the time and before I knew it, Yuigahama and Isshiki were already present in the Student Council Room.

The three girls tensely sat across from me and silently waited for me to finish while staring.

Y-You guys are making it harder to write…

But regardless, I produced sentence after sentence, eventually making the seemingly final one. I pressed the enter key, but didn't immediately remove my hands from the keyboard. I read down, line by line. After confirming that I couldn't write another sentence, I knew that the manuscript was finally complete.

"I'm definitely done now…"

My body immediately went limp and I fell back onto my chair with my arms dangling at the side. I sighed in reassurance and Yukinoshita came over to my seat.

"May I take a look?"

"…Yeah."

I pushed the laptop towards her and Yukinoshita went right into checking over my work. Yuigahama and Isshiki watched her in apprehension. Conversely, I was anything but nervous. *After all, I was free! What the heck is a deadline? I don't know what that is! Fuhaha! I'm free!* I held in the urge to scream at the top of my lungs and patiently waited for Yukinoshita to finish.

And after some time, Yukinoshita lifted her face from the computer. "…No problems to be found. Isshiki-san, please check it over."

"Y-Yes!"

Next, Isshiki started checking as well, but the fact that it made it pass Yukinoshita meant that it shouldn't have any problems. So that being said, my work was over. *Oh man, a world without deadlines really is the greatest!*

As I was inebriated with a sense of liberation, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita spoke to me.

"Good job, Hikki."

"…Good work today."

"Ahh, you guys, too. Sorry for holding things up."

Dear me, indulging in this sense of liberation almost made me feel like I had accomplished everything by myself, but this time around, it was all thanks to the three who watched over me and kept me from running away in the middle of everything.

If I thought about it that way, the euphoria I was experiencing was all because I was put under surveillance.

…So that basically means that editors and deadlines were like dangerous drugs. They definitely needed to be regulated. DEADLINES, JUST SAY NO![9]

"I'm done checking. No problems here," Isshiki said, closing the laptop.

Yukinoshita nodded back. “We’ve managed to finish on time, so why don’t we go for a cup of tea back at the clubroom?”

“We’d better celebrate!”

“I agree!”

Yuigahama and Isshiki responded back in enthusiasm. However, Yukinoshita gave Isshiki a cold look.

“You need to do the final check on everything. After that, have Hiratsuka-sensei look at it as well. That’s your job as the Editor-in-Chief.”

“Aww.”

Seeing Isshiki complaining caused Yukinoshita’s eyebrow to twitch. Noticing that, Yuigahama came in between them. “Now, now, we’re still going to be around, so come on over after you finish up.”

“Uuuugh… Yes ma’am. I’ll finish everything in a jiffy and be right there.”

Isshiki gripped her red pen even before she ended her sentence and began reviewing everything with eyes as round as a plate. We watched her with a sidelong glance while making our way out of the room.

On the way to the clubroom, Yukinoshita briefly sighed. “…Isshiki-san should have just been that motivated from the start.”

“Iroha-chan can do it if she tries.”

“Yeah, you get people like that. People who don’t do anything unless they’re backed into a corner,” I said, wearing a bitter smile to Yuigahama’s words.

Then, Yukinoshita wore a teasing smile and looked at me. “Oh, just who could you be talking about?”

“I’m talking about in general.”

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It looked like the heater in the Service Club had its repairs come in yesterday and was now completely warm and cozy unlike a few days ago.

The Student Council Room wasn’t a particularly uncomfortable place to be in, but in the end, I felt much more at ease in the clubroom. I didn’t mean this on an emotional level, but on a more instinctive level; it’s like being territorial. And when inhabiting a place for close to a year, even dogs and cats would start treating it as their own territory. I wasn’t an exception.

But the clubroom I was comfortable with looked rather disheveled due to all the work we had been doing for the free newspaper in the past few days.

While Yukinoshita prepared the tea, Yuigahama and I decided to clean up the room.

We gathered up the documents and threw them away. After taking some time to finish, we sat in our seats with exhaustion which was when Yuigahama let out

an “ah.” I turned around to her and she was holding the camera we had used when interviewing all the clubs.

“Hey, we should take a picture. A picture of the Service Club!” Yuigahama said.

Yukinoshita’s brows wrinkled. Seeing that, Yuigahama tilted her head inquisitively. Yukinoshita shook her head causing Yuigahama to tilt her head in the opposite direction.

The two engaged in a dialog with only their expressions until the door of the clubroom opened noisily.

“I’m all done with pounding the suckers!”

Issihiki came in as she spoke. *Uh, you really don’t need to say “pounding…”* When she noticed the camera in Yuigahama’s hand, she raised a voice of surprise.

“Oh, so this is where the Student Council’s camera was. Do you still need to use it?”

“It looks like she’s going to take a picture of the Service Club,” Yukinoshita answered, sounding like a stranger. *Mmhmm, you’re actually a club member, too… In fact, you’re the club president, you know?*

“Oh, I can take the picture for you.”

“Iroha-chan, you should take a picture with us, too.”

“Yes, by all means, we can afterwards…! But first, let’s take one of everyone in the Service Club.”

Isshiki firmly refused with a smile and stretched her hand out to Yuigahama. She might’ve been acting considerate in her own way. Realizing her intentions, Yuigahama handed over the camera.

“Really? Thanks so much. We’ll leave it you then! Let’s all take one together afterwards!”

“Um, I haven’t said a single thing about taking the picture…”

“Yukinon, you’re being too stubborn.” Yuigahama stated bluntly and Yukinoshita stuttered. Well, either way, she’s probably going to give in and have her picture taken in the end… Acting a little hard-headed wasn’t going to change anything, not that I was any different.

However, I recalled a persisting problem with the camera.

“…I don’t really care, but the memory card’s full, you know.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s because senpai took so many photos of the Tennis Club.”

“What exactly did you take pictures of to use up so much memory…?”

Yukinoshita stated in astoundment while Yuigahama thought it over and made a big nod.

“The Tennis Club… So Sai-chan, huh…? I guess there’s not much we can do there.”

“Yui-senpai, you’re really okay with that!?”

So she finally gave up… No, there’s a small chance she acknowledged it… Or so I thought until Isshiki clapped her hands and shoved them in the pocket of her blazer.

“If there’s no memory, how about this smartphone then?” She asked, and presented my smartphone. Speaking of which, she had my phone today, too.

“Ahh, well, there’s still space in there, so I don’t mind.”

“Okay, we’ll go with this,” Isshiki said, winking and promptly readied the phone. This might’ve been Isshiki’s consideration as well. *Honestly, I don’t get her at all…*

“Umm, okay senpai, you stay seated there. Yui-senpai and Yukinoshita-senpai should stand behind senpai.”

“Okaaay!”

“U-Um… Jeez…”

Isshiki shot out instructions and Yuigahama took the reluctant Yukinoshita’s arm. And finally, Yukinoshita gave up her resistance. The both of them then stood together behind me… Behind me?

“…Huh? Wait a second? Isn’t this arrangement kind of weird? Isn’t this like one of those coming-of-age family photos? Maybe you two should back off a bit more?”

If anything, you two are too close! Too close, I said! I mean, taking a picture together is one thing, but having you two so close to me really gets me nervous, so stop it.

The chair made a racket when I tried to get up to make some distance, but both of my shoulders were forced back. I looked up and Yukinoshita was looking at me with a sweet and cold smile.

“Hikigaya-kun, you’re being very stubborn.”

“That’s you…”

“Iroha-chan, we’re ready to go now.”

Yuigahama further pressed down on my shoulder and called out to Isshiki.

“Okay, here we go. Say cheeeeese.”

There were several flashes of light in conjunction with the sound of the snapping shutter. *Ahh, I definitely made a funny face… It definitely had to look like those coming-of-age pictures…*

As I sat there feeling dejected, Isshiki approached me and handed back my smartphone.

"Here you go, senpai… It's a good picture," Isshiki said, wearing a slightly mature smile. I didn't bother trying to ask what she meant since I was sure she meant exactly what she said.

"Hikki, can you send me the picture? Oh, actually, Iroha-chan, let's take a picture together!"

"Okaaaay! Please take the pictuure, senpai." Isshiki lightly tapped my shoulder and hurried over towards Yuigahama and Yukinoshita.

"I'd like to refrain…"

"I said no. We're all going to take the picture!"

"How should we arrange ourselves?"

While the three thought about their arrangement for the picture, I quietly looked at my phone. The screen displayed the photo of the Service Club taken a moment ago.

…She was right, it wasn't as bad as I thought. It doesn't look like a coming-of-age picture, too.

And also, before when I didn't know what to write for what the Service Club was like or what we were like, I felt like I could do it now. That's why the picture wasn't as bad as I thought.

I still didn't know what to call this club or how to define it. But I'm sure there's something we could share by virtue of having no words for it. If we did have the words, it's likely we'd end up trying to keep our manifested, awry feelings held together.

"Hikki, take the picture!"

"…Got it."

I stood up after Yuigahama yelled out. I directed the camera of my smartphone towards the girls and positioned it.

Yuigahama wore her usual energetic and bright smile.

Isshiki had her first-rate camera face.

And lastly, hugged closely from both sides, Yukinoshita, although slightly vexed, was blushing red with embarrassment.

Just how many more days of these normal trivialities could we continue to accumulate from here on?

Just what kind of pain would accompany the nostalgic sight of these photos when we became old enough?

In thinking all of that, I pressed the shutter.

Chapter 4

And so, the night in the **Hikigaya household** goes on.

It was a windy night during the peak of winter. The blast of air struck the window, causing the glass of the living room to rattle noisily. I lifted my body up from inside the kotatsu and looked outside. It was considerably late into the night and only the sight of the street lights flickering could be seen within the darkness

It seems like my parents were going to be back late tonight because of some trouble right before the fiscal year-end. The only ones home were just Komachi and me. Recently, the time we could see other and talk had decreased. There were a few days left until her exam day. Today, like always, she was bound to her room, exerting herself for her studies.

Pew pew, the wind that seemed extremely cold blew by once more. Though the heating for the living room was slight, the cold permeated the area near the window.

I wonder if Komachi's suffering from the cold up there… I thought, and directed my gaze at the wall where her room was. There wasn't the slightest sound coming from beyond it. But it's that kind of time right now. She's probably already sleeping.

Thinking I should get back to sleep as well, I lay my body down and turned over, unable to resist the comfort of the kotatsu. Kamakura, our beloved cat, came crawling out from underneath as though I had kicked him in that moment. He sent me a disgruntled glance. *Oh, s-sorry…*

After apologizing to him internally, Kamakura snorted and began grooming himself. Upon finishing, his ears perked up and he faced the door.

The door creaked open and entering the living room wearing my hand-me-downs jersey was Komachi.

"What, you're still awake?"

"I slept at a weird time, so now I'm wide awake…" she said, directing her clear, open eyes at me. Oh yeah, there were people like that. They'd laze around on their sofa or in their kotatsu once they got home and fall asleep. When it's night, they'd find it hard to sleep.

Naps like the aforementioned could certainly be utilized, but such was this season. In the face of upcoming exams, there's no way the rhythm of your lifestyle wouldn't go out of tune.

"You should just try to sleep. Otherwise, you're going to regret it tomorrow."

"I know, but I'm kinda hungry. I'll sleep after I eat something." Komachi rotated her shoulders and headed straight to the kitchen.

“Whoa…” Komachi grumbled with a small voice in shock. I dragged my body up to see what happened and Komachi was blankly staring into the refrigerator.

Ah, crap. I totally forgot, mom asked me to do some shopping the other day. I was wondering what she wanted since she called me so suddenly. I was so busy with creating the free newspaper that the shopping slipped my mind. I had dinner on my own, too… There’s probably barely any ingredients left. Komachi looked into the empty refrigerator and groaned. *So sorry, onii-chan totally forgot to do the shopping… Not good! At this rate, it’ll be my fault that Komachi starves!*

“…Alright, I’ll make you something then,” I said, tapping her shoulders.

“Eh…? You don’t have to.” Komachi turned around and shook her head.

“What, don’t be shy.”

“No, it’s fine. Like really, please don’t. I don’t want to ruin my stomach.”

Komachi spoke in a hurry while shaking her hands. This brat looked really serious when she said that… But she’s probably going to end up eating my food once I make something. What a good girl! But make sure to watch what you say!

“I’m kind of hungry myself, so either way, I’m going to make something. Your portion is just extra.” I gave Komachi a gentle push from behind and stood in the kitchen.

Komachi reluctantly nodded. “Well, if you say so…”

Despite saying that, she followed me around from behind, worried about what I was going to make, as I sifted through the cabinets and refrigerator.

I discovered eggs, milk, and tube fish paste cake in the refrigerator and from the cabinet, I came across bag ramen and canned corn beef. These should’ve been more than enough. I set them all on the counter and Komachi peeked out her face from behind me.

“I’m gonna get fat if I eat stuff like these so late…”

“It’s okay, Komachi is cute in all shapes and sizes.”

“Wooow, this guy sure is carefree.”

While Komachi mumbled her complaints, I filled a pot with water and placed it over a fire. It’s essential to use seventy percent of the bowl for water. Until it boiled, I began the preparations for stir-frying the corn beef and tube fish paste cake.

Komachi came up beside me and scrutinized every ingredient one by one.

“…Onii-chan, is this what you’ve been eating for dinner lately?”

“Not really, I usually eat mom’s food whenever she cooks. Well, I guess I did this for today since I forgot to go shopping.”

“I don’t see any vegetables at all…”

“There’s no such thing as nutrition in a man’s meal. The cows eat vegetables for us, so we’re fine.”

“I’m pretty sure they eat nothing but grain… What am I gonna do with you, jeez…” Komachi said. She opened the cabinet and stretched up as far as she could to reach her hand inside.

“Oh, there’s some nori seaweed. We can soak the wakame seaweed and… maybe we should open the canned corn, too.”

“Ohh, this is getting kind of extravagant now…”

As I watched Komachi preparing food toppings in awe, I reached for the pack of milk. Noticing that, Komachi immediately took a hold of my hand. Her expression was gravely solemn.

“Whoa, onii-chan, what are you gonna use the milk for? I dunno what you’re planning, but you’re scaring me, so stop it.”

“You don’t know? Adding milk kind of turns the broth into tonkotsu broth.”

I poured the milk in the pot as I talked. In that instant, Komachi shrieked tragically. “I told you to stop, too!”

“No, see? Thickening up the broth makes it taste better.”

I ignored the sniffing Komachi and smoothly finished up my cooking. I poached the eggs and filled two bowls with ramen from the simmering pot. Then, I added the corn beef and fish paste cake stir-fry. Lastly, once I added the wet seaweed, dry seaweed and corn toppings… the ramen was ready!

Komachi stood in place idly with a frown. I pushed her from behind and headed to the kotatsu. I placed the two bowls down in front of me and handed Komachi a pair of chopsticks and a Chinese spoon.

“Alright, food’s served.”

Komachi timidly took her chopsticks. When she took a bite, her stiffened cheeks relaxed.

“…Oh, it’s surprisingly good,” Komachi whispered. Afterwards, she would blow at her noodles and soup before slurping them in her mouth. Relieved at her unexpected, but positive reception, I began eating as well.

The both of us couldn’t handle hot food too well, so we didn’t eat that fast. We leisurely took our time until Komachi had some kind of realization and mumbled, “You really haven’t gotten any better at cooking since we were younger… It’s kinda nostalgic.”

Komachi’s lips formed a soft smile, her gaze directed towards her bowl.

Long ago, when Komachi was in the lower years of primary school, our parents would sometimes come home late. And like today, I’d cook for the two us and we’d eat together. It’s true that I could only make junky meals for men like

this and back then, but Komachi wouldn't complai—no, she complained a lot… But regardless, she'd still eat my food. Recalling all of that was simultaneously nostalgic and embarrassing.

"Rude. The food tastes way better than back then. Bag ramen improved quite a lot since then."

"That's true. Onii-chan totally hasn't improved at all!" Komachi retorted with an insult and made a mocking laugh. She continued. "But I think it'd be better if you learn how to properly cook for yourself."

"Well, yeah, I'll need to in order to become a full-time house husband."

"Mm, yeah, I really don't think you'll be able to become one. Anyway, I'm talking about for university and work. You're gonna leave the house one day, right? You'll have to know how to cook for yourself!"

"Uh, I don't plan on leaving…" I said.

Komachi gave me a cold stare. "Get out."

"O-Okay…"

What, do you hate me now? I checked the complexion on Komachi's face and she coughed. She then covertly removed her gaze from me, giving me upward glances with blushing cheeks and let out a sweet voice.

"Well, if onii-chan can't cook at all, I can always come by and make you something every now and then… Oh, that was so high in Komachi points!"

"The assumption that you'll be chasing me out is low in points…"

As we chatted, we finished the entirety of our late-night ramen.

"Thank you for the food," Komachi said, bowing her head pollitely. She then breathed out in satisfaction and laid down on her side.

"Yeah, you're welcome. Alright, now go sleep in your room."

Komachi looked like she was going to fall asleep in the kotatsu, so I called out to her. She responded back strangely with groans and mumbles, but as though something had come to mind, she abruptly lifted her body up.

"I feel like eating something kinda sweet!"

"We ain't got anything sweet."

The only things I could prepare right now were a sweet look, sweet words, and sweet thoughts. Finding that unsatisfactory, Komachi vigorously bounced to her feet.

"Okay, maybe I'll stop by the convenience store then."

"A girl should not be out alone this late at night."

"It's fine as long I don't go alone, right?" Komachi reached her hand out to me.

…Well, it's been a long time, so I might as well act like a proper older brother.

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It was a beautiful, starry night. The wind was strong and the air was clear. The moon, the stars, the street lights, and the glowing rows of houses illuminated the night street.

On our way to the convenience store, we didn't come across a single person. In that peaceful town, Komachi's voice echoed.

"Yikes! It's cold! Coooooold!"

"Seriously…"

The both of us trembled from the difference in temperature between indoors and outdoors. Komachi screamed out and crashed into me from behind. She then grabbed my arm.

"…Mm. It's a lot warmer this way, and also very high in Komachi points," she said while looking up at me.

It was hard to walk, embarrassing, and accumulating all these points was rather irritating. I stretched my hand out to her head in an attempt to pull her off. Komachi then mumbled quietly. "It's almost time for my exams, huh…? After that, I'll be graduating… Then, I'll be entering a new school."

Komachi wasn't as energetic as she was earlier. Her eyes were simply focused on the sporadic glows of the street lights, gloomily. When I witnessed her anxiety, I stopped my hand from pushing her aside.

"Komachi."

"Hm? What's up, onii-chan?"

She lifted her face when I called her name. I patted her head and gently brushed her hair.

"I'll be waiting for you in high school."

"…Mhm." Komachi casted her eyes downwards, as though I was pushing her head down. However, her small and frail voice resonated strongly.

The town late at night was frighteningly silent, our footing was unsteady, and the wind that tore through our bodies was freezing. Just when would this long winter night end, we didn't know, but time was certainly moving forward. Even the night sky overhead still had the flickering constellations of spring.

Should the seasons change, so did human bonds as they go through cycles of rebirth. Perhaps, someone new would visit that clubroom. And then, within a year, I would say farewell to that clubroom.

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?[1] For the sight of this night sky, too, will one day become my last.

That’s why, for this moment, if only for a little, along with the warmth beside me.

Let’s look up at the starry sky and walk on.

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